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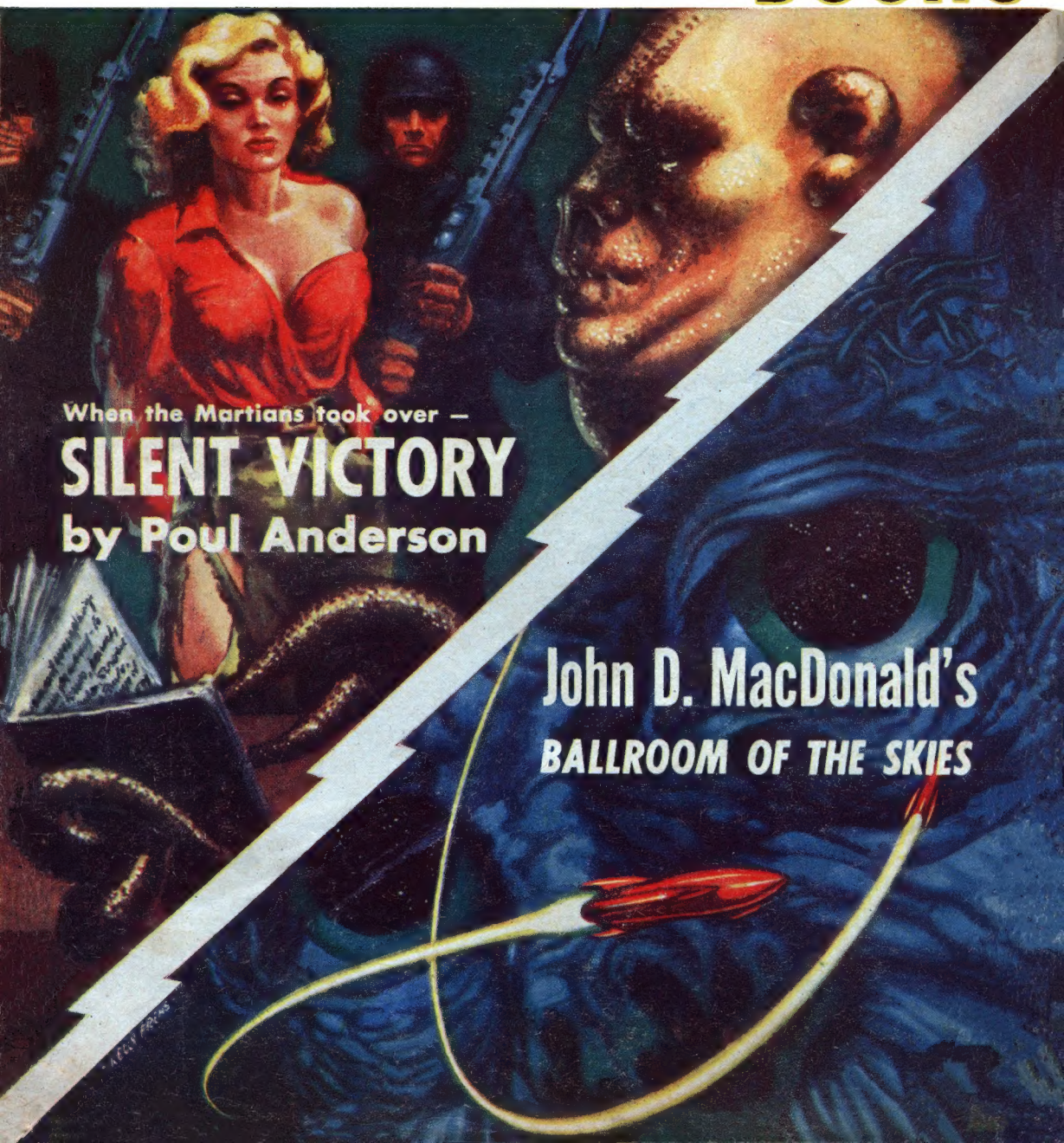

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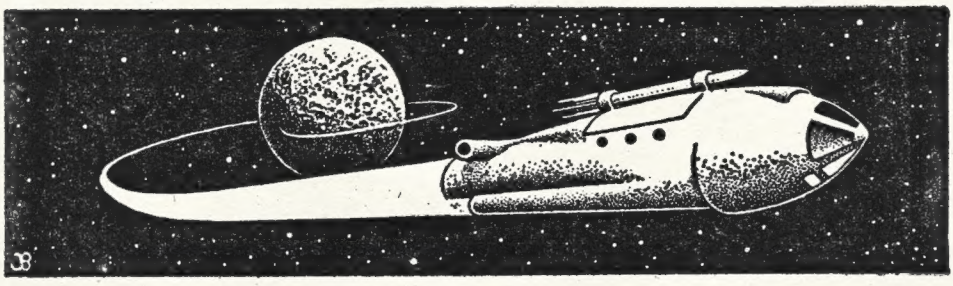
SILENT VICTORY

by Poul Anderson 2

The bitter defeat-dust of Earth whorled around the star-tanned spaceman and the sleek Martian conqueror. Small protection as they stalked the grotesque monster of the spaceways with grim death-terror and the lovely Christine their only companions.



BALLROOM OF THE SKIES

by John D. MacDonald 52

Newsman Dake Lorin clung to the frail support of an idealist's peace-dream on the thin, screeching edge of sanity —the half-world of incredible horror—until a winsome Lorelei summoned him to a dervish-dance among the stars.

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SILENT VICTORY

By POUL ANDERSON

The bitter defeat-dust of Earth whorled around the star-tanned spaceman and the sleek Martian conquerer. Small protection as they stalked the grotesque monster of the spaceways with grim death-terror and the lovely Christine their only companions.

SUNDOWN was brief, night came swiftly out of the Atlantic and flowed across the world. A few lamps blinked on in the city, but most of it lay in darkness; there was more light overhead, as the stars came forth. Intelligence Prime, lord of the Solar System, opened the window and leaned out to watch the constellations and breathe the warm air that sighed in from the endless Brazilian lands. A lovely world, he thought, a broad fair planet, this Earth—one to fight for, to seize and hold like a beloved mate.

It was not risky for him to appear at the window. His secret office was so high above darkened Sao Paulo that the very noises were lost.

Up here there was only the slow sad

wind, quiet and loneliness everywhere.

He sighed, turning away as the lights strengthened automatically in the room. Weariness lay like a weight on his shoulders.

The hunt was over, yes, this last episode was finished—but was it? And what would come after? So much to do, so terribly few to do it; he himself, chosen ruler of his people, was a slave to their own conquest. What would strike at them next, and how soon? When could they ever know peace under friendly stars?

He sat down at his desk, shoving the vague despair out of his mind with an effort. Overwork, nervous strain, it was no more than that, he thought irritably. And there was no place for it in this enormous age. He took up some papers, reports from Mars, and began studying them.

A chime sounded, jarring him in the great quiet. When would they ever let him get his work done? "Come in," he said. The annunciator carried his voice to the antechamber, and the door opened.

Intelligence Prime looked up as the sub-officer entered. "What do you want?" he asked. "I'm busy."

The sub-officer halted, and one arm rose in a rubbery motion, a salute. "It's more on the Arnfeld case, lord," he said. "Some new material, just brought to me."

"Well, let's see it, then. Don't just stand there. Death and corruption, this business was the tighest spot we've been in since the Exodus."

THE sub-officer moved slowly across the floor and laid the book on the desk. "They found it while taking that cabin apart, lord," he said. "Apparently Arnfeld was making a last attempt to tell the story to his people—he'd hidden it under the floorboards."

"Pathetic, in a way," said Intelligence Prime. "I can admire that creature and his friends. They were a brave group. Even the woman who betrayed them at the last did so for a selfless reason."

The cold light of the flouros gleamed off his great crested head as he bent over the relic. It was a school notebook, torn and dirty, and the first few pages held a child's scrawl, a few arithmetic sums, a clumsy drawing. Then the adult hand began, and the rest of the book was filled with it—a firm masculine writing, small and close together, obviously done in haste.

"Rather long," he said. "Must have taken Arnfeld several days to finish this, at least."

"They had several days in the cabin, didn't they, lord?" asked the sub-officer.

"Yes, I suppose so." The bleak eyes studied the first sentences: *This is being written by David Mark Arnfeld, a citizen of the United States of America, planet Earth, on 21 August 2043. I am of sound mind and body, and investigation of my service psychiatric record will show that I can hardly have gone insane as has been claimed. I wish only to tell the whole truth in a matter that concerns all of my race and all of Mars.*

"Hm." Intelligence Prime looked thoughtfully up. "We'll have to see about altering his record, just in case somebody does think to check it." He grinned. "I have Mr. Arnfeld to thank for reminding me of that!"

"It seems to be an account of—"

"I can see that for myself. Bring me the woman, I want to question her about this."

"Yes, lord. At once." The sub-officer glided from the room.

Intelligence Prime continued his perusal. *In order to overlook no detail which will give verisimilitude and which can be checked to confirm my story, I will tell everything that has happened, down to minute details of conversation and subjective impressions as nearly as I can remember or reconstruct them. If this lends my work the appearance of fiction, I regret it, but implore anyone who reads this to take it secretly—I cannot overemphasize the need for secrecy—to Rafael Torreos, formerly colonel of the U. N. Inspection Service, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and give it directly into his hands.*

And I must be allowed a little latitude anyway. I once wanted to be a writer, and have whiled away many hours by scribbling. Since this is probably the last writing I shall ever do, you must let me tell the story in my own way.

"Torreos," mused Intelligence Prime. "The woman did not mention his name . . .

Oh, yes. He's been working with the Martians . . . Hm, yes, we'd better take care of him pretty soon, just in case."

The chime sounded again. The door opened, silently, and two guards accompanied the sub-officer into the room. Between them was a woman. She could have been a good-looking creature in happier circumstances, thought Intelligence Prime; even now, her hair was a tangled web of gold that caught the light in a thousand shimmers. But her face was thin and white, her eyes were reddened, and she trembled unceasingly.

"CHRISTINE HAWTHORNE," he asked without preliminary, "have you seen this book before?" His voice was quiet, toneless, and he shaped his vocal cords to speak unaccented English.

"Where is my child?" she answered harshly. "What have you done with her?"

"The child is being well cared for," he said. "It will be restored to you in due course, if you cooperate with me."

"Haven't I done enough?" she asked dully. "Wasn't it enough that I sold out Dave and Reggy and my whole race?"

"What you cannot seem to understand," said Intelligence Prime with a chill in his words, "is the finality of our victory. David Arnfeld and Regelin dzu Coruthan are dead. The bodies are in our possession, what is left of them. Why—you killed them yourself!"

"I know," she said.

"Their story, such little of it as ever came out, has been totally refuted, buried, forgotten. You, the last survivor, are our prisoner—officially dead yourself, and we will never let you go. It behooves you to act accordingly. Now, have you seen this book before?"

She came closer and looked down at it. "Yes," she said at last. "It was lying in the cabin when we got there. Dave wrote in it, day after day, and finally he hid it, just before the end. He didn't tell me or Reggy where he was going to hide it, so we couldn't tell you if we should be captured alive."

"He might have known we would make a *thorough* search. Still, he had nothing to lose." Intelligence Prime jerked his thumb. "Take her away." As the group reached the door, he added with an impulse of kindliness: "You might as well give her the child, too."

"Thank you," she whispered.

The door closed behind them. Intelligence Prime sighed and leaned back, the tiredness flowing into him again. It had been a long hunt.

Well—he'd better read this thing himself. The full account of the episode, told from the enemy's side, might contain some useful hints.

He skimmed briefly over the autobiographical paragraph. Those details he knew. David Arnfeld had been born in 2017 in upstate New York, of an old and wealthy family. He had been only five years old when the war broke out; at twelve he had been selected for Lunar Academy, at sixteen he had graduated directly into spatial service, and since then most of his time had been spent as officer on various spaceships and interplanetary bases. At twenty-five he had been exec of Pallas Base, and then the war had ended and he had come home.

Intelligence Prime squinted, cursing the close handwriting, and began to read with more interest.

I

WE GOT the news from a courier boat, several weeks after the event, because the radio had been out for quite a while. We'd been expecting to hear of Earth's defeat, the end had been in sight when the Martians took Luna, but nevertheless the word left a hollowness in us. Many men wept. I couldn't cry, somehow, but I went through my duties in a mechanical fashion, and my inward self seemed to have withdrawn. It was worst during sleep-period, lying there in the dark and loneliness, and staring at nothing.

There was plenty to do, and I was glad of that, it kept me from thinking. I was virtual commander of the asteroid, the Old Man had gone into an unspeaking numbness and we hardly ever saw him. I had to wind up the paper work, of course, and there was a lot; I had to oversee the engineers and make sure they didn't sabotage the installations. Once I caught a man

at that, he was deliberately wrecking the safety controls on our main power pile so it would blow out sooner or later. When I put him on the carpet, he was truculent. "Are we going to turn this over to the Marshies?" he demanded. "Are we just going to give it to them, and kiss their skinny bums into the bargain?"

"The proper form of address for a superior officer is 'sir,' " I answered wearily. "We have orders from HQ, which is acting under the armistice agreement, to yield this base in good condition, and I'm going to see that those orders are carried out." Loosening up a bit, I added: "Mars has us by the throat. If we don't do as they say, it'll go hard with Earth. You have a family there, don't you?"

"Maybe," he said. "And maybe they were killed in the bombardment."

"We gave them a good fight," I said. "Twenty years of it. Maybe we can get our revenge later, but that won't be for a long time yet. Meanwhile, yes, we will kiss the Martians if it's necessary to keep our people alive."

I let him off with ten days in hack, but posted a warning that the next offense meant a summary court-martial. By and large, the men knew I was right. Something had gone out of them, they were beaten, and it was not a pleasant thing to see. I invented jobs for them, games, exercises, anything to jerk them back toward life, but it went slowly.

We had a four months' wait without a sign from HQ. I began to worry, we'd been on short rations for a long while and now our supplies were terribly low. I wondered if I shouldn't violate orders myself, commandeer a rocket, and go after help. Hilton's Planetoid wasn't far away now, as astronomical distances go, and they had hydroponics and yeast vats there.

The asteroid spun swiftly through a great cold dark, between a million frosty stars and the glittering belt of the Milky Way. The sun was remote, a tiny heatless disc whose light was pale on the cruel jagged rocks. Outside the base proper, it was always silent, your breathing felt thick inside the helmet.

The relief came at last, without warning: four great troopships orbiting up with a vivid splash of rocket flame, and the lean black form of a Martian cruiser for convoy. We lined up as smartly as we could and received the officers with all due ceremony. For we were Pallas Base and the fighting men of Earth's United Nations, we had beaten off three murderous attacks in a year and we had lasted out the long grinding wait between them. I think the Martian commander was pleased at our appearance. He didn't offer to shake hands, which was tactful of him, but he bowed his seven-foot body stiffly from the waist in the best manner of their military aristocracy.

"Are you in charge, Commander?" he asked. He spoke in Portuguese, and did it better than I. The Brazilian dialect may be the dominant tongue of Earth, but we were mostly Britons and *Norteamricanos* here and had used English.

"AT THE moment, Sevni," I answered as formally. "Captain Roberts is—indisposed." As a matter of fact, I knew the Old Man was in bed with a bottle, probably crying as he often did these days, but there was no reason to admit it.

"I am sorry for the delay in relieving you," said the Martian. "But there has been much work to do, as you will understand. The ships here will discharge our men, and then take yours back to Earth. We will set you all down at Quito, and provide you with tickets to whatever major cities are nearest your homes."

"You are very kind," I said.

"Thank you." The Martian waved one lean hand. I was struck anew by the odd fact that it isn't the six fingers or their extra joint or the smooth, leathery-brown skin which makes a Martian hand look unhuman to me, it's the peculiarly squared nails. "There has been too much strife. It is time for friendship between our peoples."

Friendship? I thought. *After what you did to Earth?*

We were embarked and settled down for the long run homeward. Most of the time, of course, we orbited, and I forced the men to excercise regularly. After the long time of low asteroid gravity, and now the many weeks in free fall, we wouldn't be used to Earth-weight. I think I got all of us into pretty good shape—underfed, naturally, but

hard and supple, darkened by the harsh spatial sunlight.

The officers and crew aboard were Martian, but they kept to themselves, we hardly ever saw them, and the trip went without incident. Toward the end of it, I noticed the apathy breaking in our men and in myself. Defeated or not, we were going *home!* The old worn photographs came out again, the torn and smudged letter flimsies, voices were heard in argument and reminiscence and even song. There were plans made for an annual reunion, and out of my bitterness I began to see that there had been some good times, now and then, in all these lost years.

WE took orbits around Earth, and I spent a long while at the viewport, staring at her as she turned, blue and beautiful, against the stars. There was no sign of the war on her serene face—man and Martian were small things, after all, and space and time were very big.

Ferries took us down to Quito in relays. It had been heavily blitzed, it was still one vast ruin, full of broken rocks and dead men's bones, but the radioactivity was gone by now and the mountains were as lovely as I remembered them. A new spacefield had been built, with a huddle of shacks around it that might eventually become a reborn city. I didn't kneel to kiss Earth, as many did, but I streched my muscles against the glorious massive feel of her pull and I drew the clean sharp air deeply into my lungs, and my eyes blurred for a while.

Terrestrial liaison officers met me and I spent a couple of days in the routine of disbanding my unit. The men got their tickets and back pay, with a bit extra to make up for the inflation that was putting the knife into our dying economy; they got ration books appropriate to the areas where they lived, and a printed pamphlet describing the new laws and enjoining obedience to the occupation authorities. They got their discharge papers too, but what with the clothing shortage we were allowed to wear our uniforms sans insignia. I looked at the Winged Star for a long time after it was off my tunic, before wrapping it up and slipping it into my pocket.

The human district commander, Gonzales, saw me off. "Won't you stay for a while?" he invited. "I would not advise going to New York. It was badly hit. Conditions are hard."

"Things are bad everywhere, senor," I answered.

"Aye, so. We are thrown back to a primitive economy which cannot support our population." He grimaced. "You are fortunate to have arrived almost a year late. Last winter and spring—ugh!"

"Famine?"

"And plague. The Martians could do little to help us, though I must admit they tried. But millions are dead already, and still it goes on." He looked grayly across the field. Our Globe and Olive Branch still flew, but Mars' Double Crescent banner was on a higher staff. "It is the end of human independence," he said. "From now on, we are cattle."

"We'll come back," I said. "Give us twenty years to recover, and we'll rearm and—"

He winced. "I think I would almost rather have Martian rule than the kind of fascism that would entail, Commander," he said. "However, they do not intend to let us try. We are to be de-industrialized and made a province. They will keep us that way forever—you know the Martian nature. They are not vindictive, but they are careful, farseeing, and very patient."

I thought it was a Draconian measure. Our population would likely have to be halved before we could return to an agricultural economy—and then there would be unending centuries of humans turned into peasants, handicraftsmen, fishers and loggers and miners; at best we could only become lesser bureaucrats in the Martian imperium. We would stay here, shackled by ignorance, while science and industry and the soaring starward adventure went to Mars.

Still—in their place, I'd have done the same! We had so many natural advantages, we'd come so close to annihilating them—oh, if there'd been some brains on the General Staff, we could have taken Mars in five years! Instead, we made one ghastly blunder after another, and only the fact that the Martians made almost as many had kept us going. Of course, this was the first space

war in history, one couldn't expect to foresee everything, but it was weird how both sides had fumbled it and turned what might have been a sharp, clean blow into twenty ruinous years of attrition.

Well—too late now. Too late forever.

"Farewell, Commander," said Gonzales. "And good luck to you."

"And to you," I said, shaking his hand. "To all of us."

"We'll all need it, Commander," he said.

The rocket flight to New York was uneventful. My fellow passengers, all human, all shabbily clad and grim about the mouth, plied me with questions about the space war, and I was as eager to learn about what had happened at home. I hadn't been on Earth for five years. Well, the last several months had been rugged—atomic bombardment from space, capitulation, famine and plague. Our transportation and manufacturing centers had been so thoroughly wrecked that it hadn't been possible to feed the huge urban majority, or take care of them in any way. Crime and anarchy had risen out of the ruins and still snarled around the world, though the Martian occupation forces were now cooperating with U. N. and local police to smash that violence.

"And it'll get worse," said an American gloomily. "There's years of hunger in front of us, before the population is down far enough. We can't do anything to recover. The Marshies are systematically dismantling whatever important industry we have left. There won't be any in five or six years. We'll be traveling by sailboat and horseback. This rocket line here is scheduled to be confiscated in another few months, when its most urgent freight-hauling duties are over."

"We gotta fight," said another man. "There ain't many of them. Mebbe five million Marshie troops, spread thin in, uh, garrisons all over this planet. They got the gravity against 'em, too. We got to get together and throw 'em out."

"With what?" I asked wearily. "Hunting rifles and kitchen knives? Against artillery, machine-guns, flame throwers, armor, aircraft? And don't forget their bases on the moon, either. Any time we act up, they can shoot some more rockets at us."

"You've surrendered, spaceman?" A young, prematurely hard-looking woman gave me a contemptuous glance.

"I guess so," I said. "If you want to call it that."

II

WE LANDED near evening, and I went up in the control tower of the clumsily rebuilt airport and spent a very long and quiet while looking over the city. They'd told me New York had had it bad, but I'd never realized it would be like this.

The haughty skyline of Manhattan was a jumble of steel skeletons, stripped, snapped off, and stark against the sky. Some of the buildings had caught a freakish heat-gust and melted where they stood, so that they were brittle crags of lumpy, twisted, fire-blackened steel.

Outside the great bowl of the main crater, it was all rubble, a dead wilderness of heaped rock, and I saw dust and ash scudding over it in the wind. Brooklyn was another tumbled ruin, though a few empty shells still tottered erect. Haze and gathering dusk hid the remainder of the city from me, but I saw no lights anywhere, no lights at all.

The human airport chief, who had let me climb up to see, nodded wearily at me when I came down. "I warned you against going, Commander Arnfeld," he said. His voice was flat, gray as his face. The eyes were sunken and feverish. "It's—ugly."

"How many live here now?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Who knows? A million, perhaps. Those who could, fled out into the country when the famine and diseases got under way; there were plenty of battles between farmers and the mobs. Now we truck in some food, and we can offer jobs at rubble clearing and so on, so conditions are a little better. Not much, but a little."

"How'll I get upstate?" I asked. "My home is there."

"Shank's mare, Commander, unless you can hitch a ride on one of the farm wagons. But they don't like city people since last winter."

"Well—" I looked out the window. Airport lights were feeble against the darkness that flowed in from the sea. "I'd better stay

here overnight, then. Can you recommend a place?"

"How much money you got?"

I grinned without humor. "Back pay, fifty thousand U. N. dollars. Inflation allowance, one million."

"That allowance was decided on four months ago. Now it'll just about buy three meals and two nights' lodging. The city has to pay its workers in food, clothes, and what little medical care we can offer." He tugged nervously at his ear lobe, avoiding my eyes. "I wish I could put you up for the night, Commander, but there are seven of us in one room as it is, and—"

"I know. Thanks, but I'll find something."

"Try the Benedictine Hostel. Little group of monks got together, built a shack, and put up anyone who'll help with the work. If there's any room left at all, they'll give you a doss and let you help with the chores."

"Suits me. I'll even contribute something —say half a million dollars."

"They'd appreciate it. They have a lot of cripples to look after, who can't work." He gave me directions; it was about three miles off. "But be careful," he warned. "Plenty of gangsters around. They'd as soon kill you as look at you. The last few months made people pretty desperate."

I slapped my holstered Magnum repeater. As an officer, I'd been allowed to keep my sidearm. And my spaceman's gray ought to get me some respect too—unless somebody decided to kill me for the suit.

It wasn't entirely dark yet, but the dusk was thick as I walked from the airport. I wasn't sorry; it blurred the gaunt buildings on either side of the street, empty windows and gaping doorways, now and then a burnt wreck. There weren't many others abroad, and they shuffled unspeakingly past, without aim, without hope. The silence was complete—utter blank quiet, dense and heavy, making the noise of my boots and the whimper of raw wind unnaturally loud. I walked faster, hoping to find light and kindliness.

The hand on my arm sent me leaping away, whirling around and yanking the pistol out with a snarl. When I saw that it was a woman, I knew how tensed I had been. My heartbeat was a fury in my ears.

"Hello, spaceman," she said.

I lowered the gun and took a step toward her. "What do you want?" Trying to hold my voice steady, I made it a harsh snap.

"I—well—" She looked away from me, cringing back into the doorway where she had stood. Approaching closer, I saw her draw a shuddering breath and square her thin shoulders and turn back to face me.

"Want shelter tonight?" she asked.

I looked at her for a long while, not saying anything.

"You're just in from space, aren't you?" Her voice was very low, and it wavered. But it wasn't a slum voice; she had been well educated.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, do you want to stay with me tonight?" She had to gulp before she could get it out. "I have a place."

I went up and stood before her, peering into the gloom to make her out. She was medium tall, and her figure must have been good once, but the legs under the tattered dress were pathetically thin. Young, too—early twienties. Her face was pale, the cheekbones stark under enormous eyes, but her nose had a pert tilt to it and her mouth was soft and gentle. She was trembling and breathing hard, not able to meet my gaze.

"Who are you?" I asked.

Her voice lifted raggedly, "Look, don't be this way. If you—want me, then say so. Otherwise, get on—please!"

I had been almost ten years in space, rarely seeing Earth or a human colony, so I knew a prostitute when I met one. "This is your first try, isn't it, sis?" I asked.

She nodded mutely.

"The city offers jobs," I said. "You don't have to do this."

"All the jobs left open are too heavy for me." Her tone was a mumble now. "I can't haul bricks—I tried it and collapsed. I can't get out into the country. No room left there, even if the farmers would take in another stray. And I've got a little girl to look after."

I shook my head, smiling with an effort. "Sorry, sis. I can't take advantage of you that way."

"If it isn't you, it'll be someone else," she said hopelessly. "I'd rather it was you. My husband was a spaceman."

I came to a decision. "How much do you —charge?"

"I—" A dry whisper. "Half a million. Is that too much?"

"Well," I said, "I'm looking for shelter, and you seem to have a place. I'll pay half a million for bed and breakfast—and nothing else."

That's when she started to cry. I held her close till it was over, stroking the long gold hair that was still beautiful. Her dress, I noticed, had been fairly good once, and it was almost painfully clean; how she'd managed that, without soap, I didn't know. Sand and water, maybe.

We walked hand in hand toward her dwelling. She guided me deftly through heaps of rubble, smashed stone, broken girders, sharded glass, now and then a human bone. It was altogether dark, and I often stumbled.

A big hotel had collapsed freakishly, leaving a cave in its mountain of ruin. She had camouflaged the entrance with a couple of splintered doors and one of the bushes which had begun growing here and there in the city.

We crawled through a narrow tunnel to a hole roughly seven feet square and four feet high. It was as clean as her dress, and almost as drab: a few salvaged utensils, a mattress, a dim oil lamp, and some books. There was a girl playing on the floor, a pretty little three-year-old with her mother's shining hair and huge green eyes. She ran to the woman, who took her up and murmured to her.

"You weren't lonely, Alice, were you?"

"Oh, no, mom-muh, I finked up Hoppy an' Hoppy came sat down on'a lamp an' he got big eyes an' wings an' you brought'a daddy home wif you an' Hoppy says—"

I sat down in the corner. "You'd have let your daughter watch?" I sneered. There was an emptiness in my breast.

She turned on me with a flare of rage. "If you don't like it," she yelled, "get out! You've been taken care of, you had food and work and order around you, if you died it would've been quick and decent. You didn't have any gangs to hide from, anyone else to keep alive—go on, get out of here!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I wasn't trying to be holier than thou. A man who helped bombard Zuneth can't look down on anyone."

"You were there?" Her anger ebbed from her, and she smiled. "That was our greatest victory. We must have killed a million Marshies then."

"Yeah," I said. "Hit 'em from space, just as they hit Earth later on. A million living, feeling creatures blown to bloody shreds. I'm not proud of it."

"I'd like to kill every one of them," she murmured. "Every last damned one."

"Forget it," I said. I thumbed through the books, which, from their markings, she had dug out of the library. Shakespeare, the Greek tragedies, Goethe's *Faust* in German, Whitman, Benet, and—sentimentally—Brooke. Yes, she was of good family. I thought of her huddled in here, reading *The Trojan Women*, and shook my head.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Christine Hawthorne," she said. "My friends called me Kit." I saw a flush go up her cheeks after that impulse; she thought she'd inadvertently given me a come-on after all.

"No fears, Kit," I said, "I'm what they call normal, and haven't seen a woman in a long time, but—No fears. I'm Dave Arnfeld."

WE talked for a long time. She had, like me, grown up in war, but until last year the strife had been far from Earth and she'd enjoyed a fairly decent existence. Her people had been well-to-do, cultured and cosmopolitan, she'd traveled and gone to college and known something of our heritage. Four years ago she'd met Lieutenant James Hawthorne—she showed me the faded picture of his boyish, pleasant face—and married him; but he was dead in the Battle of Juno when she bore his child. A linguist in Comcenter, she'd been at home when New York was destroyed, only a miraculous improbability had saved her and the girl, Alice. After that it had been the usual tigerish struggle to keep alive, until her will finally broke. It was coming back now, though, I could see resolution rising in her.

Only what good was that when there was nothing she could do to live?

"Where are you going?" she asked me.

"Upstate," I said. "I own a place near Albany, inherited it from my parents, and no one else is alive but me. It'll have gone pretty much to pot, but I can start it up again, I hope. Turn farmer—there isn't much else for a man to do, these days."

I knew what she was thinking, but pride made her try to change the subject. "I didn't think there were many Germans up that way."

"Swedish, if you please," I laughed. "Though most of the stock is Dutch and English from colonial days."

We fought the nation's battles since the French and Indian Wars. Now we've gone down to defeat with her.

"Look," I said, "I'll need a housekeeper and general assistant. You seem to be tough. Why not come along?"

She held the child close. "It's a dangerous trek," she said.

"All right," I snapped, out of weariness and hunger. "Stay here then."

WE QUARRELED for a while, made it up, and went to sleep. She agreed, of course. And I saved half a million dollars.

Breakfast was a quarter can of corned beef, with water lugged from the river. After that we took the kitchenware and started out. Most of the time I carried Alice, who was a gentle, quiet kid. She didn't seem too scarred by what she had been through, though Kit said she often screamed at night.

"When she gets older," I said, "you'd better get a psychiatrist to work on that trauma." Then I remembered that there probably wouldn't be any psychiatrists for Earth. Half-trained doctors would be the best we could hope for, because skilled men might do something with bacteria against the Martians.

It took us most of that day to get out of the city, and hunger was sharp within us. My uniform got me permission to buy food and a night's rest in a hayloft from one farmer, but he warned me that he was an exception.

"I thought we were all Earthmen together," I said.

"So did I, once," he answered. "Then the mobs and gangs came out o' town. I was lucky, so I ain't so bitter about it, but men who seen their houses burned and their kids killed and their women attacked and their grain and livestock stole—they ain't gonna be so friendly. It's all the city can do to make 'em sell anything."

"I see," I said.

"Your being a spacer might be dangerous, too," he said. "A lot o' people are mad about the whole war. There's stories that Earth started it—mebbe the Marshies planted that rumor, I dunno, but it's a fact you spacers bungled it so they could grab the moon and blitz us."

"I wasn't in charge," I said. "But then, I imagine people in your situation can't be expected to be very logical."

Thereafter I turned bandit. Military training and good physical condition helped. I stole a horse and wagon so we could ride, a cow to give us milk, chickens and vegetables for food—just marched in and took them at gun point, with a promise to return them with rent money as soon as possible.

The law was slack, we had no trouble with the overburdened police; but a couple of times we were shot at. Kit bore it bravely, death was a little thing to her who had seen so much of it. She was already beginning to fill out and get some color, she'd soon be striking.

We rolled and bumped through the green countryside, and memories came like drawn knives. This village, that monument, the river shining between long hills, I knew them all, I remembered. I was often silent, and Kit would smile and touch my hand.

The day came, nearly two weeks later, when we turned off the main highway and went along a rutted gravel road. My heart was loud in my breast, and I rose in the wagon and swept my arm around the horizon. "Ours," I said.

Kit's green eyes widened. "All of it?"

"Four hundred acres," I told her, and there was a high pride in my voice. I hadn't known till now just what a rootless shadow life mine had been, flitting between the worlds like a hunted ghost.

The fields were well cared for, full of young grain. I assumed the neighbors had worked them. Well, good, I'd settle for shares and have something to start on next spring. If they didn't want to share—my

hand dropped to my gun. But no, that wouldn't arise, the Smiths and Rackhams and Challengers were old frineds. I was home again.

The grove of trees about the gate was still there, and I saw the long double line of beeches flanking the drive up to the big white Colonial house. That was all I saw before an oath ripped from me and my gun clanked free. Kit shrieked and snatched her daughter to her.

The Martian at the gate slanted his rifle up to cover me. "Halt!"

III

THERE was no help for it. The enemy had decided to quarter an officer here, and I was cruelly impotent to change the fact.

We were conducted up the drive under guard, and the officer himself came out on the wide, colonnaded porch. Sunlight streamed through the trees of Earth to dapple his alien face. I stood for a silent moment, studying that countenance.

There are those who call the Martians ugly, but that isn't true, not even by human standards. Consider the long straight legs, the lean waist and arms, the tremendous breadth of chest and shoulder—it isn't a caricature of man, in some ways it is a refinement. The head, with its hairless brown skin, high cheekbones, domed forehead, narrow chin, and long pointed ears, might have been sculptured by Brancusi; the small flat nose does not break that symmetry, the mobile mouth could be human, and the big, slant, golden eyes, under the graceful little antennae, are certainly things of luminous beauty.

Nevertheless, as he stood there in his flawless black uniform, with silvered collar and the Double Crescent on his breast, I hated him.

He waited impassively for us to speak, meanwhile considering my dusty grays. The transparent third lids were drawn across his eyes against the glare of the westering sun; it gave him a blind, remote look.

I gathered all my military dignity and said flatly: "I am David Mark Arnfeld, former commander in the United Nations Interplanetary Forces, and owner of this property. May I ask the meaning of your presence, Sevni?"

He looked at me for a while longer. My medium height, stocky build, and blunt, lined face hardly fitted in with his notion of an aristocrat. But finally he bowed. "I am honored, sir," he said. "There is a likeness of you in the living room, and I have wondered if you would be returning." His English was fluent, though too crisp to be native. Vannzaru is a harsh language, half of it up in the supersonic range where humans can't talk or hear. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Sevni Regelin dzu Coruthan, representing the Archate of Mars in this district." His face remained wooden, but his eyes flickered an inquiry toward Kit, where she stood looking defiantly at him.

"This young lady is a guest of mine," I said coldly. I wanted to add: "And you are not," but he understood my implication well enough.

"Please come in," he said. With the curiously tender Martian smile: "Or perhaps I should wait for you to invite me." Then he dismissed the guards with a curt order.

We entered the cool dimness of the house. It was as I had known it, polished hardwood floors, golden oak wainscoting, burnished glass and silver, the old books and pictures and furniture, all here. I wanted to cry. But I turned to Regelin instead and asked for an explanation; I made it so chill as to be insolent.

He explained courteously. Most of the occupation forces on Earth were in garrisons, but individual officers were spotted over the planet as observers and local administrators. He was in charge of the whole New England area. It had been decided to quarter him and his guards and assistants—ten in all—in this unoccupied house, since that would be inconveniencing nobody. "I am afraid it is too late to change now," he said. "But we will try to keep out of your way, and of course you will be paid a fair rent."

"Very nice of you, isn't it?" exploded Kit. Her hair swirled about her shoulders as she turned on him, where he stood looming a foot and a half above her. "After you've burned our homes and killed our people and ruined our planet, it's easy to be

polite, isn't it? I suppose you think you're being generous!"

"Kit," I said. "Kit, please."

"I fear the lady is overwrought," said Regelin. He faced around to me. "I have to warn you, Mr. Arnfeld, that while it is not the Archon's intention to interfere unduly with the private lives of Terrestrials, any attempt at sabotage or obstruction of his purposes will be severely punished."

"All right," I said. "You've got us by the damper rods."

Wistfulness flitted across the dark face. "I would like to be friends," he said. "We are both spacemen. I was at Juno and the Second Orbit, among other battles, and lost comrades, even as you did. Can we not forget old grudges now that the war is over?"

"No," I said.

"As you wish, Mr. Arnfeld." He bowed and left me, his tall form erect.

The Martians were considerate guests. They moved out of the quarters they had held and took over the north wing of the house, where there were several rooms they converted into offices and a dormitory; they left the rest of the house strictly alone, except at mealtimes. A sentry was always at the gate and one at the north door, pacing slowly back and forth. You saw the staff whiz in and out on their scooterbugs, reporting to Regelin where he worked, but they weren't noisy. They often sat in the garden or strolled through the woods, but if you chanced to meet one he would jump up and bow. We never returned the greeting.

In many ways, they were actually an asset. They had made arrangements with the neighbors about my land, so that was taken care of. They had installed their own power plant, so we had all the electricity we wanted. They had found domestic help, an elderly couple named Hoose who lived in the servant cottage behind the mansion. Their rent payment was generous, and helped my finances a lot. All in all, I had nothing against them except that they were Martians. The conquerors.

MEALS were awkward affairs to begin with. Military etiquette insisted that Regelin use the dining room, while his men ate in the big kitchen. After a few dreary meals together, with silence on both sides, we made a tacit agreement: Regelin ate an hour ahead of Kit, Alice, and myself. Then we hardly ever saw him.

I couldn't help feeling sorry for the Martians. They were a long way from home, and Earth's conditions were barely tolerable for them. The dragging weight, the air pressure, heat, humidity, sun-glare, even the blatant, swarming greenness, were hard to endure.

"Though at that," I remarked once to Kit, "they're luckier than we would have been occupying Mars."

She frowned, the tiny crease between arched brows which I found so endearing. "Why?" she asked.

"Well, they can live here without special equipment, if they must," I said. "But put a man on Mars, without an airsuit or a dome around him, and he'd choke to death immediately. At that, he'd freeze almost as fast, after dark anyway."

"They don't breathe at all, do they?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," I said, "but it isn't our kind of breathing. A Martian's lungs are very different from ours—huge spongy masses that not only draw oxygen from the air but get it out of food—symbiosis with anaerobic bacteria. Their metabolism is pretty strange all around, though I suppose ours looks as odd to them." I sat back, longing for a cigarette. Sunlight streamed in the window and caressed Kit's hair. "They're a lot tougher than we, they can stand more punishment. Though physically we did have a whale of a big advantage in the war, in that we could endure twice the acceleration they could." I scowled. "If Admiral Swayne had had the sense to use that fact, we wouldn't have lost at the Trojans. And that was a critical battle, some say it was the turning point of the war."

"Too late now, Dave," she sighed.

She was giving most of her time to Alice, the rest went to helping with the housekeeping, working in the garden, reading, or listening to our extensive music library. It was a quiet life, but mother and daughter were blooming under it. As for me, I found the hours rather heavy on my hands. I couldn't assist the neighbors much, having no farm experience at all, and though they were

teaching me what they could they didn't have a lot of time to spare for that. I took long walks, rode horseback, puttered around the house, visited old friends, went down to the village or to Albany for an occasional spree. I tried to write, but that didn't come to much. What was there to write about, these days?

It was frank boredom which finally drove me to talk to Regelin. I had wandered from the house into the woods, following a dim old trail. It was quiet here, a rustle of leaves, a twitter of birds, a squirrel running like red fire up a mossy trunk. I had some heavy thinking to do.

Let's face it, boy, I told myself, *Kit is beginning to mean a lot to you. Call it propinquity if you like, the fact remains she's a brave and loyal and intelligent girl and it's about time you settled down anyway. Only —damn it!—she owes me too much! She's given no sign of anything but friendship for me, I think Jim Hawthorne is still very much with her. Or is he? How should I know? I've seen too little of women, I've been too nearly a monk, to tell what they're thinking. . . . If I asked her to marry me, she'd probably say yes out of gratitude and to give her daughter a home—but I don't want that. Gentlemanly instincts again? Hell, no, just masculine ego. But I can't get rid of it.*

I was getting nowhere. It was almost a relief to come around a thicket and see Regelin. He was alone, tall and stiff and black-uniformed, but his face was buried in a cluster of wild roses.

He turned, though I tried to retreat softly. Martians have preternaturally keen ears in our dense atmosphere. I couldn't read his face, but he laughed harshly, embarrassed.

"How do you do, Mr. Arnfeld," he said. "You seem to have caught me in a strategically bad position."

I grinned, enjoying his discomfiture. "Aren't officers allowed to smell flowers?" I asked.

"Oh, we have a different etiquette on Mars," he said eagerly. "Our officer corps is recruited from the old aristocracy, you know, and its members are expected to have an esthetic sense." He touched the frail blossoms. "Exquisite," he whispered. Then: "However, you of Earth seem to feel that manliness includes—ah—a certain blindness to such matters."

I leaned against a tree bole and shoved my hands in my pockets. "Your civilization is older than ours," I said, rather cruelly. "Some have called it decadent."

He bowed, with ice in his eyes, and turned to go.

"No, wait." Impulsively, I went after him, even took his arm. "I'm sorry. There was nothing decadent about the way you whipped us at Juno."

"I understand your grace," he said. It was the old Martian formula for accepting an apology.

"Sit down, if you're not in a hurry." I lowered myself to a fallen trunk, and after a moment he joined me. We sat quietly under the sun-spattered shadows till he said, slowly and without looking at me:

"Yes, forty thousand years of recorded history is a long time. But it never got off its planet, we weren't technically minded, and it had fallen into feudalism when you came. You taught us to build machines, draw energy from the atom; your challenge and example drew us together into the Tarketh dzu Zanthevu—Archate of Mars, as you call it. We had, of a sudden, new hope and new strength, and our eyes turned starward. The younger taught the older. Mars owes much to Earth."

"But you destroyed us," I said. I felt no bitterness just then, in that oddly suspended moment; it was as if we were old comrades talking of something that had happened centuries past.

"In self-defense," he said, equally low. "You declared war on us."

"After your fleet seized Hera."

"We had to. You claimed the asteroid group from which we got most of our thorium, and were about to grab it. We needed a defensive base."

"Let's not hash it over," I said. "It's a long, ugly story of growing commercial and military rivalry, clashing imperialisms, rising tensions. It finally blew up in our faces."

Regelin shook his head. The light turned to molten gold in his eyes. "I cannot understand it," he said. "I am a military man, not an Assembly politician or a Cabinet noble, so perhaps I do not grasp some essential fact. But *why* should that rivalry

have built up? Why should one incident after another have strained relations between our planets? There was enough in space for both of us."

"I don't know," I said. "It often puzzled me, too. Of course, we were told it was a matter of Martian aggressivenes, and you were no doubt told the same thing about us. Now the propaganda blanket is so thick we'll never get at the facts."

"Even so," he said, "it should have been a short war—a limited war for limited goals, such as you Earthlings used to have in your fifteenth or eighteenth centuries." I blinked, surprised that he'd studied so much of our history, and realized how blankly ignorant I was of his. "It shouldn't have become that long-drawn, hideous doom-of-gods it was."

"Well," I said, "space is big. In the beginning, as I recall, there might only be one engagement a year."

"One engagement might have settled it, if either side had had truly competent commanders. It is not for me to criticize my superiors, Mr. Arnfeld, but you must know yourself how often the chance for a decisive victory was lost—by both sides. For instance, if we had pushed on after Juno, instead of going home—" His fists clenched and his voice grew thin. "Skyblast! I was in Intelligence then. We *knew* we could catch your Task Force Three beyond Venus and annihilate it in detail. After that, the war would have been virtually over. But no, we went back to Mars."

"Well, you haven't a monopoly on such blunders," I said. "There was a near mutiny when we let your ships escape after Second Orbit. And if the chief admiral hadn't panicked at Mars and taken us back, if we could have kept on bombarding you—"

"The destruction of Zuneth was your most terrible mistake," he said gravely. "Before then, we would have settled for very moderate terms, even after an absolute victory. But when you laid waste our greatest and oldest city, the pride of all Mars, well, that atrocity made us howl for blood. After that the Archon and the Assembly all voted to end Earth as a power in space."

"We shouldn't have done it," I mumbled, wondering if he knew I had been there. "If we bombarded at all, we should have been thorough—but it was wrong to do it in the first place, yes."

"STILL," said Regelin, "we would not have been vindictive. We would have settled for your disarmament and an indemnity, I think. But your politicians and admirals were too reckless. When we finally broke through and took the moon, they must have seen the game was up. They should have surrendered then and there. But no, they managed to keep the very fact secret from a people who would otherwise have revolted. They called for their remaining fleet to come home and give battle. After that, we had no choice. We took over the U. N. rocket bases and wiped you out. And now the temper of Mars is such that you will never be given another chance."

"I understand," I said.

"A fourth of our small population dead," he said heavily. "Our economy shaken, groaning under taxes, the folk impoverished, the whole history of our race thrown back. It will take us a hundred years to recover. Oh, a cold victory!"

We sat without talking for a long while, then. I think the same thought was in both of us: *It's as if Earth and Mars together had an evil genius, as if something has driven our two unhappy races, against reason and desire and decency, to this war that wasn't needed, that only brought ruin. But forget that. It's our own stupidity. Any other assumption is paranoia.—But was the war less mad?*

"How long will you be here, Sevni?" I asked finally.

"On Earth? I don't know. Several years, I'm afraid. Reorganizing your planet will be a long and difficult task." Regelin smiled wryly. "You, the defeated, are home, comfortable, safe, you can pick up your life again and be free. We, the conquerors, are chained here on a world we cannot love. Strange war, strange victory!"

"They might bring your family here," I suggested.

"Oh, no, I would never wish that for them. Let them stay in the old castle on the edge of the Purple Gulf, let them breathe air that is clean and cool, and gather thornblossoms, and hear the crystal bells across the redsand plains at sunset."

I couldn't see anything attractive about his grim and barren world, but I nodded.

He felt eagerly in his tunic. "Here, let me show you," he said. "I have a portrait, my wife and three children—"

Martian females look less human than the males, but I pretended a degree of admiration.

"That is a most attractive young woman you have," he said shyly.

"She's not mine," I said, and got up. "I'm going back to the house."

We walked slowly along the trail, talking. Regelin was fond of our classical music, but hadn't felt free to attend the concerts in Albany or, since I came, to use my tapes. "Go ahead," I offered. "Borrow as many as you like."

"You are most gracious, Commander," he said. I knew enough of the curiously knightly Martian code to realize that his addressing me—illegally—by my old rank was a considerable honor. "It is a shame you cannot hear the total range of my people's music. But I have been amusing myself by transposing some of it to your range, when I find time, and it might interest you—"

"Sure," I said. "We have a good piano, and I used to be pretty fair on the violin, too. Let's try it sometime."

The conversation shifted, as such do. I was astonished by the range of his reading in our literature. Much of it puzzled him, but he tried hard to put himself into the human personality. I suggested some books to him, and he told me which were the best English and Portuguese translations of Martian classics.

We came out on the lawn, side by side. Kit was playing with Alice on the grass, and I saw how the light and shadow touched the curves of her.

She looked up and saw us. Regelin bowed, but she turned to me, and her eyes were the bleakest sight I have ever seen. "What were you doing?" she asked. There was a thickness in her tone.

"Why," I stumbled, "just talking. Talking with Sevni Regelin. He—"

"I see." She bit off the words, one by one. "I see. Well, Mr. Arnfeld, I will be leaving tomorrow. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Hey, now!" I grabbed for her arm. She shook me off with an angry gesture. "Kit! Kit, you can't—"

Her lip quivered, and I saw the tears begin. "Let me alone," she said.

Regelin stood like a black steel pillar, his long shadow falling across us. Looking up into his face, I saw that it had gone blank. His voice snapped like a clicking trigger. "Mr. Arnfeld, I am sorry to have bothered you, but my business forced me to do so. As for the records we discussed, you need not concern yourself. I do not require them after all. I trust I shall not have to disturb you again."

He bowed and strode off, past his saluting sentry and into his office. I didn't see him at all for several days.

Kit wiped her eyes after a while, apologized, and followed me into the house. That night I went down to the village and got drunk.

IV

THERE is not always a sign on the events that change your life, to tell you what they are. The chain of destruction which has ended here where I sit helplessly waiting, began with Regelin's announcement to me, a few weeks after our talk, that we would have visitors. He spoke with the court formality that had become habitual, and the third lids veiled his eyes from me.

"We will have two guests tomorrow, who will stay for three or four days. They are Dzuga ay Zamudring, inspector for the Commandant of North America, and a terrestrial liaison officer. Since the Martian quarters in this house are filled, and you have an extra bedroom in your section, I must request that you offer them accomodations."

"That was not in the bargain," I said as stiffly as he.

"A fair rental will be paid you. I would prefer to keep this on the basis of a request, Mr. Arnfeld."

Well, there was nothing I could do. My refusal would simply have made him order me to house the strangers, and that would have strained the thin relations between us close to breaking. I agreed with as good a grace as possible, and went to find Kit.

There were three bedrooms in a row on the second floor of our wing: mine, hers, and the empty one, which lay at the end of the hall. She made a wry face. "Next to me?" she asked. "I could stand the Martians, maybe, but a human traitor—"

"Some of us have to cooperate, if Earth is to keep any vestige of self-government," I said tiredly. "I'll trade rooms with you, if you want."

"Hmmm—well" She stroked her chin with one slender hand, and I saw thoughtfulness in her eyes. "Who are these creatures, anyway?"

"An inspection team, checking up on the various districts for the continental commandant. Important officers."

"I can stand it." Her voice was remote. "We needn't swap." Suddenly she came to some kind of decision. Her laugh was brittle. "Do me a favor, Dave?"

"Sure," I said. *Anything at all, Kit.*

We had a little museum of family relics, and it turned out that she wanted to borrow the ear trumpet of a nineteenth-century ancestor, to amuse Alice. I agreed, of course, and she laughed with real merriment and kissed me. It was all I could do to keep my response—brotherly.

That evening I noticed that the bath hose was missing. I swore, because it would be impossible to replace, and called Mrs. Hoose to task for it. She denied any knowledge of its whereabouts, and started a grumbling search, without luck. The trivial thing soon faded from my mind.

The inspector came the following afternoon, roaring up the drive in a long groundcar, accompanied by a squad of scooterbug-riding guards. Those wore light body armor and carried guns at the ready; there must be a good deal of sniping at Martians. The guards set up camp in the back yard while the inspector, a tall wrinkled Martian who seemed to creak with age, and the only human in his party, a plump, balding, middle-aged man introduced as Hale, were received by Regelin in the living room. Kit and I were asked to join them, and she surprised me by turning on all her charm, smiling and laughing and ringing for drinks. *What's she up to?* I wondered.

Hale offered cigarettes, which I hadn't seen for months, and lifted his glass. "I'm happy to see you people so hospitable and—considerate," he said with a politician's geniality. His voice was loud, it didn't fit in this long quiet room. There was a tradition that Thomas Jefferson had once been entertained here. I nodded, keeping my face chill, but Kit responded gaily to him.

"It has been a cruel war," said Hale, "but now, thank God, it is over, and we must start rebuilding." He looked at me. "Perhaps, Mr. Arnfeld, you would consider taking a job similar to mine. We're badly in need of human go-betweens at occupation headquarters." My manner froze him off, and he turned to Kit. "Miss—ah—Mrs. Hawthorne, possibly you—"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I have a daughter to look after. But it must be interesting work."

Hale boomed on. He told a couple of off-color stories which obviously embarrassed the Martians, though they smiled mechanically. Dzuga was almost wholly silent, and Regelin said little more than I. Hale and Kit more or less took over the conversation, then and at the evening meal which we all attended. I gathered that he and Dzuga would use this house as a base for the next few days, while they surveyed the district. I was glad when bedtime came and they were shown to their room. I let Kit do that; the room had been my parents'.

She met me in the hall afterward, and I saw her flushed and angry. "He pinched me," she whispered furiously.

"Well," I said, "you invited it, my dear."

She gave me an odd look. "They've locked their door," she said, "but you can hear them talking."

I paused outside the room, listening. There was a low mumble from it, but I could not make out any words.

A couple of hours later I was sitting in my own room, trying to read. Except for the lamp, I was in darkness. Warm summer air blew through the open window, stirring the curtains. I was so absorbed in Housman—a strangely right poet for today—that I didn't notice the door open. She was at my side before I knew she was there.

"Dave," she said.

I looked up, startled. The lamplight threw her against night, all shadow and shimmering glows. She wore a robe over her pajamas, sheath-like around her slim form. My heart began to thump.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Come along, Dave." There was a queer, strained note in her voice, and her eyes were frightened. "I want you to—hear something."

"Hm?" I got up, thinking more of the way her long loose hair tumbled over her shoulders than of anything else. "What's up? Are your neighbors telling dirty jokes?"

"No, this isn't funny." She caught my arm with tensed fingers. "I've been—listening in on them. Using that ear trumpet. I meant to do that all along, just as a gesture. I didn't think it would mean anything."

I scowled. "That could be a dangerous hobby, Kit."

"*Listen,* won't you?" She stamped her foot, and her voice was a sudden fierceness. "They're talking in there, and it isn't in any language I ever heard. Not English or Portuguese or—anything!"

"So they talk Martian," I shrugged. "What of it?"

"Damn it, Dave," she cried, "I was in Comcenter!" Lowering her voice again: "I had to get a working knowledge of linguistics. I can follow half a dozen human languages, and Vannzaru and three other Martian dialects, and recognize most of the others. This isn't *any* of them. It doesn't even sound like them!"

She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door. I followed, suddenly unsure and wondering. "Some special, artificial language?" I muttered.

We entered her room. Alice was sleeping in a crib, whimpering a little. Briefly, I wondered what the child's dreams were like. Kit took the ear trumpet off her bed. She had tied it to a broomstick, and slipped my bath hose over the narrow end. "Here," she whispered. Sweat glistened on her forehead. "Here, use it for yourself."

Decision. I went to the window, and my right hand edged the stick along the wall until the trumpet was just under the guest-room window. My left hand brought the hose up to my ear. I listened.

"Tahouwa shab-hu gameel weijhak."

"Shakheer! Kesshub umshash woteeha."

I felt coldness along my spine, and muttered a curse. It was not only that the grunting and sibilant noises were strange to me. It was the rhythm of them, the low rise and fall, the whistling overtones and the rattle and gurgle beneath. I wondered if any human or Martian throat could form those syllables.

In any case—those were not the voices of Robert Hale and Dzuga ay Zamudring!

Slowly, I withdrew the trumpet. My hands were shaking. Kit and I looked at each other for a long and silent time.

"Who are they?" she gaped after a moment. "*What* are they?"

Alice moaned in her sleep. The old grandfather clock ticked noisily in the night stillness.

"I don't know," I whispered.

She came close to me, and I drew her against my breast. She was trembling so hard that her teeth rattled in her head. "We've got to find out," she forced through stiff lips.

"How?" I stood holding her, thinking with a brain that seemed frozen. "We can't go to Regelin, you know how he'd react, and there isn't anyone else."

"We can get proof." Her tones were wild. "We can convince the Martians—"

"How do you know this isn't some secret gadget of theirs?" I demanded. "It's got to be that."

"We have to *know,*" she mumbled. "Alice here, and those—creatures—in the next room—"

I kissed her, blindly and harshly, and she clung to me in the same search for comfort. "We can't do anything," I said. "Not a thing. We're helpless. But I'll stay here tonight."

"Dave—"

I went back into my own room, got my automatic, and returned to hers. We locked the door, and I sat by her bedside, holding her hand, till she dropped off into a restless sleep. Those voices had been too unnerving for me to think of anything but defense—now. I sat all night in the chair, sometimes dozing and coming to with a jerk. About midnight, the yellow square of

luminance on the lawn snapped out; the strangers had turned off their light. I wondered if they slept.

Dawn was cold and gray over the wide, empty fields. I waited till I heard Dzuga and Hale go downstairs before venturing out myself. Kit stirred, opening shadowed eyes to mine, and I bent over and kissed her cheek. "They're gone now, darling," I said. "Go back to sleep."

She smiled drowsily and turned over.

I washed, shaved, and went downstairs myself. Hale and Dzuga were still at breakfast. The—human—greeted me with a sly wink. "Good morning, Mr. Arnfeld," he said cheerily. "You seem tired."

I gulped the scalding chicory which Mrs. Hoose gave me.

"I couldn't help noticing that your bedroom door was open and your bed hadn't been slept in," went on Hale. He winked at me. "Ah, some people are lucky."

"Mr. Hale, if you please," said Dzuga with affronted rigidity.

I looked at them. They were so perfect, the gross well-fed man and the gaunt, almost prudish Martian. Every last detail, every curve of cheek and glitter of eye, the dress, the voice, the manner. I wondered if I had dreamed those mutterings in the night.

No—I hadn't done that. My head still felt hollow from weariness, the stolen ear trumpet still lay up in Kit's room, and Hale *had* noticed I'd not slept in my own bed.

"WE WILL be gone all day, I imagine, Mr. Arnfeld," said Dzuga. "We must lock our room and ask that under no circumstances be it opened, under penalty of the espionage statute. There are important documents in it."

"Of course," I said dully.

I was out on the lawn, soaking in the bright early sunlight, when Kit joined me. She sat down and laid a hand in mine.

"Dave," she said, "we've got to break in there."

"And get shot as spies?" I asked. "Don't be silly. This is some Martian secret. Forget it. We'll trade rooms tonight."

She smiled and rumpled my hair. "You're such an old-fashioned gentleman, Dave," she said. "You're almost a Martian yourself."

"That room," I said, "is to be left strictly alone. Savvy?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes, master," she said demurely.

I worried about her for a while. We were both fighters of a kind, I supposed, but my spirit was the careful, slogging sort, war had been a trade to me, based on calculated odds; hers was buoyant, almost gay, often reckless. She had sloughed off her terror of the night like a cast skin. But she behaved herself 'til well after lunch. Then my own tiredness caught up with me and I went to take a nap.

I was shaken back to consciousness and sat blearily up. The sunlight had a late-afternoon quality, I must have slept for hours. A look at Kit's whitened face brought me out of bed with a violent surge.

"You haven't!" I groaned.

She nodded. "I had to. Nobody else is around. Come on, come quickly, you have to see this."

I slipped on a robe and followed her. My mouth was dry, and sweat prickled my body. But it was too late now. I could only try to repair the damage.

A skeleton key from the museum had easily turned the ancient lock. Inside, the room looked utterly normal, the beds neatly made, nothing disturbed. But a Martian-type trunk was on the floor, and Kit opened it. I saw a few changes of clothes, it looked harmless enough.

"There's no shaving kit," she told me in a flat voice.

I thought of Hale's blue jowls. "Maybe he lost his razor," I said. "Or maybe he just carries it with him, or—"

She opened the upper compartment, below the lid. It was filled with papers. I took the sheaf out and went through it, careful to keep the items in order. Lists, notes, maps—but the uncial writing was not one that Earth or Mars had ever known. Shakily, I restored the bundle and lifted the folded clothes.

On the bottom of the trunk lay two—pistols? I didn't know. They were massive, stubby things of blued steel, stamped with a strange symbol, and they didn't fit my hand very well. They wouldn't fit a Martian's, either.

"What are they?" she breathed

"These? Weapons, I suppose." I laid them back.

"No—*they*. The strangers."

"I don't know." I shook my head, slowly. "Do the Martians have allies from—outside?"

"Allies who look and act exactly like our two races?" She hissed it with a note of anger.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We replaced everything, closed the trunk, and locked the door behind us. I put on some clothes, and then we went downstairs and into the living room to return the skeleton key.

Regelin was there, waiting. One of his guards stood behind him with a cradled carbine. "Where have you been?" he asked, very softly.

I held face and voice steady with an effort that seemed to drain me. "Upstairs," I said. "Having a nap."

"I wondered—" He looked at my hand. "That is the skeleton key from your museum, isn't it?" He spoke like a snapping whip.

"I—"

"We couldn't unlock my door," said Kit. Her tones wavered.

"You have been in the guestroom." It was not a question but a statement. "You have been spying."

Something collapsed within me. I'd had no training for this work, I'd bungled the job disastrously, and now I read death in his eyes. I stood there, saying nothing.

"Yes, we have!" cried Kit. "And I'll tell you what we found, too."

"I am not interested in gossip." Regelin's tone was ice and darkness. "You are under arrest."

"Listen!" she screamed. "It concerns Mars, too. Those things aren't Martian, aren't human!" She babbled the story in a shaking rush of words.

I COULDN'T read his face. He said thinly: "My oath obliges me to obey my superiors. I shall have to report this affair in detail." With a flicker of gentleness: "I shall request clemency."

"You fool!" she raged. "You idiot!"

Regelin turned to his guard. *"Zurdeth agri."* Take them away.

We were locked into Kit's bedroom. She burst into weeping and held Alice close to her. I sat looking out at the dying day.

"I'm sorry," she gasped at last. "I got you into this."

"Never mind," I said. "I'm glad you did." Which was a lie, but worth it to see the comfort it gave her.

There was a sentry under our window and one outside the door—no chance to escape. We sat holding hands while darkness thickened. It was about ten o'clock when the door opened and Regelin's aide motioned us curtly to come. We went downstairs between the guards.

Hale and Dzuga were seated in the living room, Regelin stood by the window, the four other Martians snapped to attention against the wall. Warm lamplight filled the place, but it was very quiet.

Dzuga finally turned to me. His face was impassive, and his voice was old and tired. "Sevni Regelin has told me an unpleasant story," he said.

"You shouldn't'a done it." Hale shook his head, and light glistened on his scalp. "You're in bad."

"Under the occupation law, you are subject to death without trial," said Dzuga. "We will take you to headquarters tomorrow. Possibly clemency can be arranged, but I doubt it."

"No." Kit's tone was small and dry. "We'll never get there alive. You can't let us tell the authorities. We'll be found dead in a ditch."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, please—" said Regelin.

"You too," she told him. "We told you what we know. You're coming along, aren't you?"

"I have been ordered to accompany you and give testimony," he said.

"You'll never give it," she answered.

"Your conclusions are altogether fantastic," said Dzuga. "Because we find it necessary to use codes, and have also some experimental models of weapons, you assume that—" He waved a hand and snapped an order in Vannzaru. *Take them back upstairs. Lock them in till tomorrow.*

I swayed a little on my feet, and out of terror and despair I managed a jeering note. "Your character is slipping, Inspector," I said. "No Martian aristocrat would send a

prisoner hungry to bed if he could avoid it."

"We forgot," said Hale. "We'll send you some food."

A great steadiness came over me. All right, I had leaped to conclusions, built up a crazy structure of hypothesis, but—

What did we have to lose?

I measured distances with a fleeting, unnaturally clear glance. Four armed Martians standing against the farther wall, but ignorant of English, not knowing what was being said and not expecting trouble; a single floor lamp three feet away, with Dzuga sitting four feet beyond that; French windows, six feet to my left, opening on the front lawn and darkness. And a spaceman develops fast reactions.

I took a stride toward Dzuga. I whined, and was curiously aware, at the edge of my mind, of Regelin's sudden contempt. "Sir," I begged, "we were wrong. We're nervous, had delusions—"

"That will do," he snapped.

My hands closed on the floor lamp and I rammed it forward like a spear, into his face. Light exploded before us, and then darkness thundered over us. "The windows, Kit!" I bawled. "The windows!"

Plunging forward, I hit a solid form in the gloom. Regelin! My fist smashed into his belly, and I heard him grunt. He twisted his arms about me, dragging me down.

"Get out, Kit!" I yelled. *Get out!"*

Two flashlights snapped in the hands of guards leaping forward. They shone on horror. Dzuga wasn't a Martian.

Wasn't anything!

V

HE WAS slumped half-conscious across his chair, and his moaning was not that of human or Martian throat. In the flying glimpse I had, I saw that the black uniform was drawn tight over a suddenly thickened and shortened body, a pale soft skin. The head was muzzled, chinless, a fleshy crest rising on the skull—animal. The exploding lamp had burned that face, and the great colorless eyes looked out of a seared ruin.

Then the light caught me, where I still struggled with Regelin, and a Martian voice barked an order I knew from the war. It was too late. I couldn't get away. Slowly, Regelin and I released each other, and I raised my hands.

Someone clicked on the ceiling lamp. My eyes went to Kit, who had been grabbed by a Martian and had just now given up her kicking, biting, clawing fight. Her face was wild under the disheveled gold hair, and her breasts rose and fell in a swift gulping. It had been hopeless, that attempt of ours. But —

We turned to look at the thing which writhed and whimpered in the chair. A soldier whispered a curse, another signed himself with the Double Crescent. Otherwise there was only our heavy breathing and the night outside.

Hale stood forth, a little, baldish, potbellied man with a sudden iron calm on him. "This is unfortunate," he said. "You have stumbled on a top state secret."

The door to the Martian wing began to open. They'd heard the racket in here and come to investigate. Hale snapped a command in Vannzaru, and the door closed again before they saw.

"And you're one of them too," I said.

He nodded. "Obviously." With a smile that was drawn steel: "We are an—experimental model. Something from the Martian laboratories."

Regelin's gaunt hand rested on his sidearm. "Don't," said Hale. "I am your superior officer."

The sevni snapped to attention.

My mind was moving more swiftly than I had thought possible, cold and clear as lightning in the sky. "It won't wash, Hale," I said, and was dimly amazed at the evenness of my tone. "You're no more Martian than I am."

His eyes narrowed, exactly as a man's would. "You will go back to your room immediately," he said.

I turned to Regelin. "They talk between themselves in no language of this planetary system," I said. "They keep notes in an unknown writing and weapons not of Martian make. If there really were such beings developed on Mars, they'd be a military secret of the first rank. They wouldn't be allowed to gallivant over this planet where any accident might betray them."

"That will do!" snapped Hale. "Sevni,

send these Earthlings back to confinement."

"If you do," I told Regelin, "you're selling out your own planet; and they'll kill you into the bargain."

The guards stood with guns covering us, eyes flickering from one to another, waiting for orders.

"Sevni," said Hale, "remember your oath."

"Which was to be loyal to the Archate," I said. "Not to aliens who have infiltrated it."

REGELIN stood there, unmoving, for a century of minutes. His face was withdrawn, expressionless, but the golden eyes blazed. No one spoke. I looked at the thing called Dzuga ay Zamudring. It—no, he, the uniform had split and I could see he was male—was recovering himself, sat almost upright, breathing hard. He was hairless, his skin white, his eyes flat in the round theriomorphic face. There was a big braincase—though the head had changed shape too. Teeth and nails were almost gone, and he had seven stubby fingers on each hand, and the whole body gave an effect of rubbery bonelessness. He stood about as tall as I, but was broader, a square build.

Finally Regelin sighed. His pistol came out, and he barked an order to the guards. They looked almost happy as their carbines swung to cover Hale and Dzuga.

"You will regret this, Sevni," said Hale.

"I am going to contact headquarters," said Regelin. "You and—your friend—are under arrest. So are you humans, though I'll give you the run of the house and grounds till further notice. I am duty bound to report this."

"I tell you, it's top secret!" cried Hale.

"I shall report directly to the continental commandant," said Regelin. "Meanwhile, no others shall see you."

The prisoners were led upstairs, locked into their room with the four guards told off to watch them. Regelin gave Dzuga some ointment for his burns, but had me carry the trunk downstairs. We went through it item by item.

"Quite possibly Hale is right and we shall all be shot for this," said Regelin evenly. "However—" He turned to Kit and me, formally. "I apologize for the earlier misunderstanding. You were right and I was wrong."

Impulsively, Kit took his hand. He sighed, wheeled about, and went into the Martian wing.

We moved Alice in with the Hooses, just in case. Neither of us could sleep. We went back to the house, threw together some kind of meal, and afterward sat in the living room. We didn't say much.

Regelin came back about midnight. He sat down across from us, and his eyes were dull. "I finally got through on a closed circuit to the Commandant," he reported. "Ruanyi dzu Varek himself. He ordered me to absolute secrecy and said he was sending a squad at once."

"Didn't he say anything about whether this is a Martian project or not?" I asked.

"No. Nothing. It is very strange."

Kit looked at him. "If he were roused out of bed and given such a story," she said, "he might not be able to think fast enough. He might slip out of character, just a little bit."

Regelin closed his fists. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"You know it as well as I do." Her voice was ferocious. "If these aliens can make themselves look like anybody, and if they have infiltrated, they'll be in the highest governmental posts."

"This inspection team wasn't too high-ranking," he said.

"They'd want to check up for themselves," said Kit. "See just how their war has succeeded."

"*Their* war—"

"It fits, doesn't it?" I asked. "The unnecessary war. Two peaceable worlds, lashed to battle by one provoked incident after another. The bungling on both sides that made the thing such a long and bloody mess, that nearly wrecked both planets. Yes, I think they've controlled both our governments for decades."

"But if they can simply come in, disguised as us—if they can take over all our riches—why *should* they destroy us—make us destroy ourselves?"

"I don't know. Softening us up for invasion, perhaps. Maybe the armada from Alpha Centauri is already on its way."

"No! That doesn't make sense! The logis-

tics of it are simply ridiculous." Regelin got up and began pacing, back and forth, back and forth. "And a race capable of mounting an interstellar invasion would be so far advanced technologically that it wouldn't need to conquer anybody."

I leaned back in my chair, suddenly exhausted. "Be that as it may," I told him, "I predict this: The squad will come with orders for you to release those two things. By then, Dzuga will again be Dzuga. You and we and your four guards will be hustled off and never heard from again."

The iron in him broke. "I can't mutiny," he groaned.

"No," said Kit viciously. "You can only die."

"Give us a chance, at least," I begged. "Let us take a car and get out of here."

"I have to think," he said hoarsely. "I don't know what to do."

He paced up and down for a long time. His boots fell dully on the carpet.

I LEANED over to whisper to Kit—I'd attack Regelin, we could overpower him and get away—I had forgotten how well Martians hear. He looked at me with a haggard smile and said: "Don't."

Then, after another moment, he threw back his shoulders, suddenly calm, his decision made. "I am with you in this."

Kit leaped up and kissed him. I could only clasp his hand.

"Don't make assumptions," he said quickly. "I am a Martian before all. If Hale was telling the truth, I shall be shot for mutiny; and doubtless lives will be lost before that happens. But I cannot take the chance—those few lives are nothing against the possibility that Mars is being conquered from within."

We laid swift plans, but they got us no further than escape; beyond that we couldn't think. Kit went back outside to get Alice while I packed a few necessities and as much food as I could. Regelin ordered his private car made ready, and gave me a huge roll of greenbacks to take. We went upstairs together, then, and down the hall to the guestroom door.

Regelin dismissed the guards. It was, perhaps, cruel to abandon them, but they couldn't be trusted not to turn on us. Then he opened the door and we went into the room. I switched on the lights.

Hale still wore his human form, and Dzuga had reassumed Martian shape. They got out of bed and stood looking down the muzzle of our guns.

"You are going to tell us the truth," said Regelin. "The whole truth."

Anger flushed Hale's face. "I have already done so," he said.

"I know something of biological science," declared Regelin, "and I also know that revolutionary weapons are not developed overnight. I do not believe any Martian laboratory could have created your kind. You are from outer space—*aren't you?*"

Hale shook his head. I gathered myself, ready to beat the truth out of them. Whether I could have brought myself to torture or not, I don't know. We were already too late.

Regelin lifted his hand as I moved toward them. "Listen!"

We heard it soon after, the steady thunderclap of a rocket drilling the sky, and it was coming nearer. The squad from Headquarters!

No—they couldn't have gotten here that soon. Ruanyi must have called up a nearby garrison and had them send that vessel. Which meant it was really urgent to him—

We shot the aliens in the head, feeling no remorse for executing the murderers of our planets. I had half expected them to change shape in death, but they remained the same as they sprawled on the floor. *They died like men,* I thought with a grisly humor.

"Hurry!" gasped Kit.

Regelin tossed a sheet of paper to the floor, on which he had typed an account of our findings. If the squad was of hostile aliens, it would be useless; they'd burn it. But if Hale had told the truth, it was some small justification for our mutiny, and perhaps the authorities would try to take us alive. Perhaps.

We clattered down the stairs and out to the driveway. The car stood there, idling—a long black ovoid, Diesel-powered. Kit tumbled into the back seat, Regelin and I into the front; he let me drive, and we slid away from the house.

"Now where?" he asked.

"Try Albany," I said. "We can hole up there for the night, maybe."

The engine roared behind me. By the vague dashlight glow, I saw our speedometer creeping over the 200 mark. The wind of our passage bellowed, but I could hear Alice crying in the back seat and Kit soothing her.

Regelin leaned toward me. "The hunt will be on by morning," he said. "They will have the number of this car."

I nodded. "We'll ditch it in Albany."

It was only minutes to the town at our speed. We slowed and purred down empty streets. The moon was hidden by the buildings, and lamps were turned off to conserve Earth's thin remaining trickle of power.

I PARKED in an alley and we walked out into the night. Our feet sounded loud on the pavement, we were the only ones abroad. This was a run-down district, hangout of what crooks and bums the city had. I knew a disreputable hotel, and halted before its dim blue light. Leaving the others outside, I walked in, my nose in a handkerchief that managed to cover most of my face. A sleepy clerk looked up. "Yeah?"

"Single for tonight," I muttered. "Hurry up, please—I gotta bad nosebleed." I had cut myself to draw blood and stain the handkerchief.

The clerk demanded a quarter million in advance, and I peeled it off and carried my own trunk—with all our possessions—up a dark stairway to the shabby No. 18 he had given me. I let myself in, locked the door, and climbed down the fire escape. We four went back up it. Kit and Alice were quickly asleep on the bed, while Regelin and I tossed for the chair. I lost, and stretched myself on the dirty floor. Oddly, I wasn't long about falling asleep either.

In the early morning, we opened a can of beans for breakfast, and conferred over it. "The alarm will be out by now," said Regelin. "And what can we do?"

"Go to someone we can trust," I said. "We can't talk to just any local sheriff or Martian officer or whatnot. Even if he believed us, which is unlikely, he'd have to go through channels, which means the enemy would soon be able to stop him." I scratched a bristly chin. "The man I'd like to see right now is Rafael Torreos. He's an old friend of mine, I *know* he's all right. And he is, or was, a colonel in our Intelligence, and has some connection with Martian higher-ups. He'd be able to do something." I chuckled drearily. "But unfortunately. Torreos is in Brazil."

"Could you send him a letter?" asked Kit.

"With the postal service shot? No. Unless we can find someone going to Brazil who'll deliver it."

Regelin scowled. "I think I could vouch for Sevni Yueth dzu Talazan, in our own Intelligence," he said. "And he would have much more influence than your Torreos. However, he will not believe so fantastic a story without proof. I would not believe it myself."

"And if Yueth's in your C.I.A., as you say, he's way to hellangone in North America GHQ," I grumbled. "He might almost as well be in Brazil. It's fifteen hundred miles."

"Nevertheless—"

"I'm s'ill hungry, mom-muh,' said Alice. It reminded me joltingly of how awkward a party we were.

Proof. The best proof, perhaps the only one, would be an alien. If dead, the corpse would have to be in alien form, unless dissection would reveal its otherness. I wondered how many of them there were. *Anyone you meet, the coffee shop proprietor, the aid station attendant, the cop on the corner, the boy on a bicycle, any one of the may be a monster.*

No, probably not. They might assume humble disguises for special purposes, but generally they would be the rulers—officers, nobles, politicians, big businessmen, key bureaucrats. Society is a great machine, and they had to be in the vital positions to control it.

I didn't think their numbers were enormous; but the fact that they gave the orders would turn every man's and Martian's hand against us.

So—the aliens would be concentrated in the big headquarters, in important offices. We'd have to go clear to the stronghold of Ruanyi dzu Varek himself, and *he* was almost certainly of the enemy. Clear to Minneapolis, with all the nation hunting us.

But at least it would be an unexpected direction. Logically, we ought to head north

for the woods. And Regelin's friend Yueth would be in Minneapolis too.

I got up off the floor. "Let's go," I said.

VI

IT WAS up to me to get transportation; Kit and Regelin were too conspicuous. I left them talking, he soothing her with an account of his family and their home on Mars, and went downstairs. The ordinary slack suit, such as I was wearing, offers no way to mask a face; and the weather outside was damnably bright, which gave me no excuse to wear a hooded raincape. I would just have to rely on the fact that most people are unobservant. I crossed the lobby with my skin prickling.

I passed the desk. Different clerk now, why did it have to be that alert-looking boy? "Back after breakfast," I flung at him over my shoulder. So nobody would blunder into the room—

Having occasionally ridden here for a spree, a few hours to forget I was beaten and broken, I knew the district fairly well. There was a small garage with a used-car business on the side, not far from the hotel. I'd never talked to the owner, but he was a young man with a missing hand, the prosthetic was a service issue—a former spaceman. He was tinkering with a car when I walked into his shop. Nobody else was there, and my breath shuddered out of me.

He straightened and regarded me with spaceman's eyes, the long steady squint against actinic glare. "Yes?" It was a voice full of bitterness and protest.

"I want to buy a small truck," I said.

He looked surprised, then, and gratified; his business must be almost zero these days. "I got a couple good ones," he said. "Come on out and look at em."

When the sunlight was full on my face, his eyes hardened. I could almost read his mind, remembering: *Five feet eleven, stocky build, brown hair, gray eyes, snub nose, cleft chin . . . Reward . . .*

"What was your outfit?" I asked. In the effort to hold itself steady my tone was flat. "I was with the Sixth myself."

"Fireballs," he answered, very slowly.

"The Ninth—yeah. A good fleet. You were with us at Second Orbit."

"That's where I lost my flipper," he said. "You were—lucky."

"Not so far. In fact, my luck's been so bad I've decided to leave town. There are better places. Something might still be done to help Earth get on her feet again."

"Maybe," he said doubtfully. "I'd like to see that happen, but I got a wife and kids. I know better'n to buck the Marshies."

"Some people don't," I said. "But a wise man who'd like to see better days might keep his mouth shut instead of getting poor damned fools into trouble. Even for a reward. My name's Robinson."

He grinned then. "Okay, Mr. Robinson. Maybe I could let you have a truck cheap. Only it won't get you very far, you know. Even charcoal's hard to come by."

"Oh, I'll make out. I'm just an average guy trying to get along in the world. So damned average that people often fail to recognize me."

"Yeah, your face is easy to forget. Okay, now here I got—"

We finished the deal quickly: a battered old pickup with a canvas-covered box was mine for a price which cut deeply into our funds but was nevertheless a bargain. I shook hands with the dealer as I left, the plastic claw was hard and cool in my palm. "Good luck, Mr. Robinson," he said.

I clattered back to the hotel and into the alley behind it. No one in sight, no one watching, but any minute a face might show at a window, someone might walk in on us. I whistled softly, and my companions scrambled down the fire escape and crouched in the box while I went in and got my trunk and checked out of the hotel.

Coming out of Albany and onto the road to Rochester was like being born again. I looked at green fields and old trees and the homes of men, sunlit under the tall blue sky of Earth, and laughed aloud.

The wheezy old wreck could hardly make Rochester before dark, but that suited me well enough. It was clearly hopeless to try to get to Minneapolis on the highways. Lack of fuel, mechanical breakdowns, and the occupation police like hounds on our trail—impossible! We had to take another route.

I stopped after a while and let the others into the cab with me. Regelin wore a hat and one of my shirts, he would seem hu-

man enough to a casual glance, and Alice was hidden on her mother's lap between him and me. We could pass for any local farm family—I hoped.

"Where we goin', mom-muh?" asked the girl. A breeze through the cab ruffled her fine light hair, and the big eyes looked out on a world which at that age is all fable.

"On a long trip, dear," said Kit gently.

"Can I bring Hoppy too?"

"Of course," said Kit. "We wouldn't do without Hoppy."

Regelin smiled. "Who is this Hoppy?" he asked. "Your doll?"

"Oh, no," said Alice. "Hoppy's a mons'er. He got wings an' come sit onna bed inna mornin' an' talk to me. I fink up Hoppy when I get lonesome. You know any mons'ers, Mista Marsman?"

"A few," said Regelin gravely. "Here and there."

Kit shook her head. "It's like a nightmare," she murmured. "So slowly, with them chasing us, and we're going right toward the heart of the danger."

"It might be well if we left you and the child to hide with someone," said Regelin.

"Won't work," I said bitterly. "Who can we trust? If anybody took them in, he might get scared later and betray them for the reward or just to save his own skin. And with the breakdown of travel and communications, everybody is naturally becoming more interested in what his neighbor's doing. Strangers arriving to stay with someone would stick out like the good old sore thumb."

My garageman had, with elaborate casualness, told me the public announcement, which had gone on the air about dawn and been rebroadcast periodically. We three wanted dead or alive for mutiny, murder, and conspiracy. We were believed to be insane, with systematic delusions to which no one should pay attention. The reward was considerable—a hundred million U. N. dollars, convertible into Mars' hard currency if desired. Handbills and posters with the same information and our pictures would be issued soon.

Kit whistled at what I said. "They want us *bad!*" With a forlorn little smile: "Never thought I'd be worth that much to anybody."

"You are to me, Kit." I reached down and squeezed her hand. She gave me a strange look.

Regelin's face was haggard. "When my family hears of this—" He shook his head, letting blankness slide over him.

It was mid-afternoon when we heard the siren. We had just gone through a village, and I saw the pursuing car streak from it. My heart gave a leap and then settled down into a steady, furious drumming. "Down!" I yelled. "Out of sight!"

Kit had already pulled Alice to the floor. Regelin dropped over her. I threw a blanket across the two and laid my gun beside me. The siren howled and the blue ovoid edged alongside us, forcing us off the road.

I stopped and turned to face the man who was climbing out. There was another with him, holding a tommy gun. State troopers—young, both of them, ordinary decent lads from the green dales of Earth. My voice sounded blurred in my ears: "What is it, officer? What'd I do wrong?

"We're checking all vehicles. Orders." He leaned in the window, his revolver level at my temples. "Let's see both your hands on that wheel, mister."

"Look here—"

He did, and I saw the tautening of his face. "Come out of there," he said slowly. "With hands up."

"I haven't—"

"We'll have to hold you for investigation. Come on, now, out!"

Something slumped within me. "Officer," I asked dully, "are you collaborating with the Martians too?"

"So it *is* you—"

I'd given them their chance. Now I moved fast. My left hand chopped down on the barrel of his gun, sweeping it aside and grabbing the wrist, while my right pulled up my own weapon. I fired, and his head exploded before me.

Regelin was up in the same movement with me, throwing himself across my lap and pumping shots at the man in the police car. The tommy gun stammered once, and then he collapsed in the seat and fell slowly to the floor. Magnum bullets do not leave a pretty corpse.

We got out. The fields were empty around us, two neat white houses peeked

through a screen of trees, the sunlight was bright and warm on the road and the blood and brains. Somewhere a thrush was singing.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the dead men. "I'm sorry, boys."

Kit was weeping, not hysterical but quietly, hopelessly, shielding her daughter from the sight. Regelin and I put the bodies in the car and drove it off on the shoulder. He mopped the spattered mess off me as well as he could, and we took the car's armament and drove on.

AFTER a while Kit looked up and touched my mouth. Her fingertips were cold. "You were hurt, Dave," she said. "You're bleeding."

"I bit my lip too hard, I guess," I said tonelessly.

"It wasn't murder, David," said Regelin. The first time he had ever called me by my name. "This is war."

"I wonder what the difference is," I said.

We turned off the highway and followed dusty country roads into the lowering sun. We didn't talk much between ourselves, but Kit prattled all the time to Alice, trying to keep her happy. After dark we stopped to eat, and then pushed on.

Lake Ontario lay quiet under the moon, its darkness broken by a ripple of cold light. You could hear waves lapping on the shore, and the stars were majesty overhead. "I know this region pretty well," I told them. "Lots of little resort towns hereabouts. Should be one with a yacht club not far away."

We chugged into it—a pretty little place, plastic cottages under trees, on lawns that were dew-glimmering in the moonlight. Few windows glowed, Earth had no time or money for resorts these days, but there were permanent residents. We pulled up on the dock and stretched ourselves gratefully after the long, cramped ride. My belly muscles were still drawn tense. Walking over hollow-sounding planks, I selected our boat, a sweet craft whose owner took obvious pride in it. I felt sorry for him.

While Kit and Regelin made it ready, I drove the truck back out of town, to a spot where the weed-grown lawn of an empty house sloped into the lake. I set the controls on automatic, pointed the truck at the water, and got out. If my garageman had done a competent job of repair on its water shielding, it should get quite deep before it stopped.

By the time anyone thought to hunt for our tracks—a boat thief wouldn't likely be identified with the mad killers—they should be gone. I walked back to the yacht club and jumped into the boat. We cast off and tacked against the landward breeze, out onto the lake.

"And where will this take us, did you say?" asked Regelin.

"Clear to Duluth," I said, "if the bombardment didn't wreck the St. Lawrence waterway. And there'll be little if any traffic on the lakes, and we needn't worry about fuel."

I took the first watch. Kit and Alice had the boat's one bunk, Regelin rolled in a blanket beside them and was asleep at once. Earth gravity must have worn him down more than he admitted. I sat alone by the tiller for an hour or so. Then the door of the little cabin opened and Kit came softly out to sit down beside me.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "Will you talk to me, Dave? I feel so horribly alone."

"Sure," I said.

She looked up toward the sky, where the Great Bear wheeled and Andromeda's nebula was a tiny whorl of silver impossibly far away and the Galactic belt's clustered suns ran like a pale river between the constellations. "I wonder," she said. "I wonder which of those stars they came from."

"No telling," I said. "It's a big universe."

"Big and cold." She shivered. I laid an arm about her waist, drawing her close to me.

"I'm not afraid for myself," she said in a thin voice, a child's voice full of pain that is not understood. "I've seen too much in the last year to be afraid of what can happen to me. But Alice—she's all there is left to me."

"Well," I said, "I'm no hero either. We've been forced into this. We're not trying to save Earth, but our own necks. Reggy is the only true altruist, I'm afraid."

"He's—good," she said. "I never knew Martians could be so gentle." Fiercely:

"And they turned us against each other! They made us kill each other."

"Maybe they're doing it for the wife and kids too." I said. "War is always an ugly business."

She looked at me a long time. "Can't you hate at all?" she asked finally, wonderingly.

I shrugged. "Sure. But I'd rather not. A man is thrown into himself, out in space. You do a lot of thinking, and things no longer look as simple as you might wish them to be."

"Dave—if by some miracle we should win out—if these aliens can somehow be exposed and overthrown—what then?"

"I don't know. I assume Mars will ease up the conditions of peace for us. She probably won't abandon control of us at once, but we'll be allowed to rebuild. In a few years, maybe, they'll get together on an interplanetary union, like the U. N. One is at least allowed to hope."

"And you—what will you do then?"

"Can't say. Go into business, maybe; there's a wide field for research and development in rocketry. Or settle down and really try to write. I'd like to hand on some of the thinking I did out there, and tell the whole story of space."

"Don't you ever want a family?"

"Sure." I forced a laugh. "Want to apply for the job?"

"I think—" She fell silent. Then, slowly and very softly: "I think perhaps I might."

The boom nearly crowned me when I let go of the tiller.

I needn't go into detail on that voyage. It was a strange and utterly happy interlude. Sun and rain and wind, glitter on the lakes, forests green on the shores, loneliness around us like a wall— We were on short rations, we huddled wet and cold against the rains, we cursed contrary winds, we felt a hand close on our hearts when one of the infrequent aircraft flashed overhead, we were cramped and comfortless, but we wished the trip might last forever.

Regelin was tactfully blind and deaf, he spent most of his time playing with Alice. Sometimes all three of us would talk together, otherwise it was Kit and me, all the years before us bright and insubstantial as sunlit, wind-driven clouds. Our little time was like a life, bounded on either end by darkness, but it was today, held in our hands, and today was forever.

We made landfall some two weeks after our departure, grounding the boat on a pebbled beach north of Duluth and splashing ashore to the forest. That night we slept on pine boughs with the wind talking in the trees overhead. Our interlude was ended, and we started out next day for the new capital of North America.

VII

DULUTH had been a busy port, but with Chicago in ruins the upper midwest cities could be left without bombardment to die on the vine. We circled it and began hiking across country, traveling by night along empty roads, under heartlessly brilliant stars. By day we hid ourselves in copses, haystacks, grainfields. The farmers here had not suffered as much from city mobs as in the east, and I had little trouble begging enough food for my party—our own supplies had been consumed in the boat.

Minneapolis-St. Paul had been fairly important for a while after World War III, as a terminal for the rapidly expanding airfreight lines; but technology made such pivots unnecessary within a decade, and the double city had been left to dignified obsolescence, a minor airport and manufacturing center, rather quaint and old-fashioned. Its undamaged buildings and central location made it a natural choice for Martian continental headquarters. Neither Kit nor I had ever been here, but Regelin knew the place well; there was a sad humor in our being guided by him.

A week's hiking from Lake Superior brought us to the outskirts. We stopped in a wooded tract to clean up, washing ourselves and our nylon clothes in the river until Kit and I looked like any civilian couple. Regelin's uniform came out of his bundle, to be scrubbed and dried; its plastifabric snapped to a crisp military neatness and the silver glistened on its black.

"And now," he said, "we break up the group temporarily. If either division fails to make the rendezvous, the other must go ahead as best it can." His words rang with decision, and his six-fingered handclasp was firm. I had to admire him; for myself, I

felt only a dull hopeless dread, a slogging sort of courage which went on because there was nothing else to do.

Kit and I crouched in the long grass and watched him stride confidently out on the highway. It wasn't long before a Martian truck came from the north; he flagged it down and stepped coolly inside. He needn't even bother explaining himself unless there was another officer around. "Lucky devil," I muttered.

"Till someone recognizes him," said Kit.

We began trudging at sunset, a man and woman and child. By midnight we were well into the neat northern residential section, walking down the dark length of Lyndale Avenue. There was a stirring of life at the corner of Broadway: a few bars open, a thin flow of traffic. My heart sprang when I saw a Martian standing on the corner with a notebook. Kit drew me back into the gloom and her hand was cold in mine. "Let's go around the block," she whispered.

"No," I said, forcing it out between my teeth. "We can't afford to act furtive. He's observing everything, but it must only be routine. Traffic analysis, maybe. Come on."

We went right past him. His incurious yellow eyes brushed us and wandered away again. To the untrained Martian, humans of a particular race look very much alike. We were leaning heavily on that fact.

Later on, we met others: a patrol walking down the streets, a party of drunken enlisted men singing one of their weird ballads, a young-looking soldier drifting past with loneliness on his face. Their cars and trucks purred by us, big steel beasts wearing guns like horns. Now and then an aircraft whooshed overhead, murmuring in for a landing. I saw Martians coming out of homes in which they had been quartered, more of them every minute as we got closer to the loop. It was a strange sight, those tall gaunt forms and unhuman helmeted heads against the shabby-genteel homeliness of a minor human city. It made the occupation wholly real to me.

We turned off on Seventh Street and went through a neat district of impersonal multi-family units—that meant there'd once been a slum here, I thought—toward the glow of the downtown section. The loop was concentrated within a small area, some ten blocks square, bounded sharply by warehouses, factories, and cheap hotels. The rendezvous was one of the latter, the Rocket Haven, only three blocks off the main drag. We entered the dingy lobby and went up to the desk. "Room for two," I said.

"Sorry, mister." The clerk's sleepy eyes hardly noticed me. "Place is full up. Martians, you know."

"Now there," whispered Kit with a wry grin, "is an unforeseen complication."

"Look," I said, "we just got in from Des Moines and we're ready to keel over. We've tried several other places in town, and none of them'll give us a thing. I got a wife and kid here—have a heart!"

"I said we're flat out," answered the clerk. "Can't even spare a bathtub."

I looked at the register where it lay open before me. A name, picked almost at random —Fred Gellert of Duluth—"Why, say, you've got an old friend of mine here!" My voice came out dull with weariness, but I tried to smile. "Mr. Gellert, see? I meant to meet him anyway, knew he'd be in this place. He won't mind sharing."

"That's his business," shrugged the clerk. Indifference was like a mantle over him, he was one of Earth's broken men. "His key ain't here, so he's most likely up there now."

"We'll go see. And look—" I slipped one of our few remaining thousand-dollar bills onto the desk. "My name's Robinson. James Robinson. I'll just call you up from the room when we get it straightened out, and I'd like you to write my name in by Mr. Gellert's. I'm expecting a visitor, you see."

We climbed three flights of stairs, not daring to say anything when the halls were full of Martians. Enlisted men, I noticed; the top officers would naturally have the big hotels, the lesser ones be billeted in private homes. These were a quiet, almost stolid lot, the peasantry and hunters of the dry sea bottoms and the stony hills. We heard the wailing of their songs like sorrow in the air.

When I knocked on Fred Gellert's door, we were briefly alone. Kit hissed in my ear: "Are you crazy, Dave? He won't take us in. This is just drawing attention—"

"We've *got* to meet Reggy here," I said, with a bite in my tone. "There's no other way to do it. If he can scout around through town, right out in the open, we can—"

"Yeh, what is it?" A grumpy, half-awake sound, the door opening a crack. "Who the hell you think y' are?"

I opened the door and stepped inside, my pistol leveled on Fred Gellert's stomach. Kit closed the door behind us and sat down on the bed, watching us with large eyes. "Don't say anything," I told him. "I wouldn't hesitate to shoot you, though I'd rather not."

His eyes narrowed after the first amazement. An undistinguished-looking man, pudgy, his sandy hair tousled with sleep, his pajamas gaping over a pink expanse of belly—but he reacted fast, there was a quick hard brain in him. "You," he said. "Arnfeld."

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "We need this room tonight. Maybe we'll need it tomorrow too. You won't be harmed if you cooperate. If you have any needs of nature, attend to 'em now, because you're going to be tied and gagged for quite a while."

I did an efficient job of it, ripping up a sheet and lashing him fast; he hadn't a chance of working free. I laid him in a corner and turned to Kit. She had phoned the clerk and had then undressed Alice. The two of them were already in bed, asleep.

I COULDN'T bring darkness to my own eyes, not all at once. So I sat down and told Gellert the whole story, not expecting him to believe it, just hoping forlornly that if we spread the tale widely enough it might live on after we were dead. I wondered why he was in town—maybe he'd taken one of the fat jobs the Martians offered to humans—but felt too tired to question him or search his effects. Presently I dozed off.

A knock brought me awake, sleep draining out like spilled water. The gun was in my hand as I slipped the door open. Regelin stood there, tall and black against the dim hall light. I let him in and woke Kit, brushing my lips across her cheek. Reggy folded his long frame into the chair, sighing with weariness. He looked a query at Gellert's bound form, and I explained.

"Good work," he said with a brief crooked grin. "Now as for my adventures, things went quite well. There are so many of my people here that I needed only mingle with the crowds; I went right to the Foshay Tower itself, the heart of NAHQ, and studied the directory. Then I had a friendly conversation with a little human switchboard operator, who was very flattered at attention from a Martian officer. We went out and had coffee together, and I got quite a bit of information about administrative personnel."

Kit frowned. "That surprises me," she said.

"Oh, not all your race hates us," said Regelin. "Those who haven't suffered too much from the war and its aftermath, and have received good treatment at our hands, and have decided they might as well learn how to get along with us—What is useful, of course, is that none of them is likely to tell one Martian from another."

He leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "What we have to find is a Martian officer who is actually an alien, and whom we can capture and expose. I believe I have located our victim. Yoakh Alandzu ay Cromtha is an aide to Commandant Ruanyi, and has charge of all reports and data filed by the inspection teams as well as the regular occupation officers; in short, he gets all the information about this continent, and helps correlate it with that from the rest of the planet. It is a natural spot for an alien. When I learned further that Alandzu is a taciturn, unfriendly sort, who never unbends unless perhaps with his own staff, and whose antecedents are uncertain—well, that seemed to clinch it. My girl looked up his quarters for me: Suite 1847 in the New Dyckman Hotel. He'll have a bodyguard, who will doubtless be an alien too, but surely they won't be expecting us to assault them."

"So we grab them quietly and call up your friend Yueth and have him come look at the evidence," I said slowly. "All well and good. Only how will we make Alandzu oblige us by changing his shape?"

"Well—" A ghostly smile hovered on Regelin's lips. "You might try breaking a lamp over his head."

I stood up, feeling the eerie tingle of readiness in me. There was no longer time to be afraid. Holding Kit against me, I kissed her for a long while. Then Regelin and I went out and into the street. I let him walk well in front of me.

It was about 3 a.m. then, darkness and silence like a muted ocean over the city. A

few lamps glowed one-eyed along Hennepin Avenue, a car purred down its empty length, a pair of Martian patrollers moved at the remote end of vision. I had a sense of enormousness around me, the city was like one vast organism sleeping, crouched to wake with a scream.

Half a block further along, the facade of the New Dyckman held a dim blue glimmer. It slid off the helmets of the two sentries who paced before the entrance, up and down, up and down. I saw Regelin turn past them, casually flipping an answer to their salute. Darkness masked his face as he disappeared inside. I slouched on down Hennepin till I came to the alley tunneling in toward the parking lot at the rear of the hotel. There would be guards here, too. I walked into the courtyard.

"Halt!" The command rapped out in an indescribable accent. Turning, I saw the two sentries approach me with rifles at the slant. They weren't very suspicious—what could one wanderer mean? I moved toward them until they stood almost against me, tall black shadows casqued in metal. I made my voice thick, and swayed on my feet.

"Yeh? Wha'ya wan'? I gotta getta zheneral's car. Zheneral tol' me get 'is car, 'e did—"

"Go," said the nearest. It must have been one of his few English words. He took my arm and tried to steer me back out of the alley. "Go."

I hit him, then, the edge of my hand full into his larynx. It is a brutal blow when you know how to deliver it. He went down with a sob, clattering to the hard ground. My foot was already behind the ankles of the other, I pushed him and he fell, and my boot crashed against the temples of both. I hope I didn't kill them.

THEN I had to run. With Martian hearing what it is, there'd be somebody to investigate in seconds—but the two guards would be in no condition to say where I'd gone. It would be assumed a purposeless act of resentment—I hoped!

Weaving between the cars, I made a jump, caught the fire escape, and swung myself up. *I seem to be getting addicted to fire escapes,* I thought in a moment of fleeting gallows humor. But I couldn't run up it, that would have been a public announcement. I had to *flow.*

By the time I'd reached the seventh story, there was turmoil underneath me. I waited, fighting the need to gasp air into starved lungs. Soldiers were yelling and flashing lights around. One beam swept me where I lay, and for an instant I awaited the shock of bullets. But I was wearing dark clothes and not moving at all.

We couldn't time this. Regelin would almost certainly be in 1847 before I—and what then? I was to be the second wave of the attack, in case one was needed. I lay clawing myself fast to the iron, it was wet with dew under me, and thinking that this was nonsense. If Regelin could get to the door at all, we had succeeded. Alandzu would never suspect a Martian voice calling him, saying it was an urgent message; he'd open the door and find himself looking down a gun barrel— Of course, we might have to fight later on, if help didn't come in time. I'd be needed then.

It was forever before the commotion down there began to even out. I crawled up the stairway on hands and knees, hoping that what racket still went on would cover my noise. Eight, nine, ten—Was it ten? Had I lost count? Inside myself. I cursed.

Seventeen, eighteen. My knees were rubbed raw. I opened the door and stepped into the corridor's dim length. The room beside me was 1823. So I'd gotten it right after all.

I padded down the empty hall, letting the numbers slide by. This way, around this corner—yes, a thin sliver of light streaming under the threshold, that must be our door. Regelin was sure to be there now, covering the aliens, maybe wondering what was holding me up.

I paused. All right, my nerves were drawn nearly to snapping, I was plagued with nightmare fancies, there was no time to lose in melodramatics. Only—why take chances?

I went on past the door as quietly as I could, turned a couple of corners, and found a fire escape on the east side. It fronted on another blank wall, just across an alley. And there was a ledge running around the hotel building, below the windows: for the washing machines, I supposed. Sticking the gun

in my belt, I edged out on the strip, spread-eagling myself, and began working my way along. Oddly, the acrobatics soothed me, I was alone in clean darkness with nothing to fear but my own awkwardness. And a spaceman is necessarily a good tumbler.

Rounding the corner, I saw the window I was after, shining into night. I shuffled closer until I was against the edge of it; then, craning my neck, I peered briefly in.

I swear I had only thought Regelin might not have arrived yet. He had to be the one to enter first; they'd be too suspicious of a human voice. But I saw him standing with raised hands, disarmed, four guns aimed at his midriff.

Four Martians watched him.

No—four alients. They must be!

Somehow they'd gotten the drop on him. Warned? How? I clung there with a thin breeze whimpering under my feet, digging my fingers into the wall. What to do, what to do?

If I burst in like the U. N. Marines to the rescue and yelled "Hands up!" they'd have time to shoot him and me both; I couldn't get all of them that fast. For a sick instant I thought of returning to Kit and running with her, running away forever.

No, the hunt would never stop till we were dead, and that wouldn't take long. I set my teeth. Drawing the gun, I clicked it to automatic fire. I leaned over, catching the window sill with my left hand, and shot through the pane.

The noise was like doomsday. I saw them fall, marionettes scythed down without warning, a spurting of ruined flesh and bone. Almost with the same movement, I went through the shattered window myself and sprawled on the floor.

"Good man!" said Regelin grimly. "They were expecting me when I came in. I never had a chance. Of all the incredibly bad luck —David, Gellert is an alien!"

There was no time to think of it then, no time to see Kit and Alice alone in the room with a monster. We had to get away. Regelin must have planned this out while he stood guarded, schemed in the pale hope that I could save him. He flung open the door of the suite's adjoining room and pointed me to the bed. I dove under it. He himself stood rigid against my side of the door.

It was only moments before the main entrance was being smashed in. I lay there hearing boots crash on the floor and a howl of Martian voices.

It was a crowd that jammed inside, an excited crowd. Regelin took a long chance, but the only one. He stepped out again into the larger room, mingling with the swarm. "No one in there," I think he shouted. "The killer must have gone out the window." He began to give orders—you three go have all the fire escapes watched, you go call the military police, you pass the word to the main office. The rest of you get out, you're messing up the trail, I'll stand guard here.

INCREDIBLY, it worked. Or maybe not so incredibly. Martians are not that different from us: a murder had been done, the crowd was too feverish to think, and he was a high-ranking officer who seemed to know what he was about. In a couple of minutes, we were alone.

I crawled from under the bed to find Regelin going through the pockets of Alandzu's batman. "Here," he said. "The keys to his car. It ought to be down there in the parking lot."

We went out the window and fumbled our way recklessly fast along the ledge until we came to the fire escape above the courtyard. Regelin clattered briskly down it, with me creeping well behind him. A pair of guards at its base challenged him. "No one on this stair," he must have said. "Here, help me down. . . . Now quick, which is Yoakh Alandzu's car? He wants me to follow a trail for him."

They didn't realize who had been killed. Time crept past, second by thundering second, while Regelin opened the car and got in and started it. He ordered the guards to watch in the alley mouth and they snapped to it, vanishing into the shadows. He slid the car near the staircase. I dropped down, landing on my toes, and bounced into the front seat and huddled on the floor. The car got smoothly into motion.

"And now for Kit," he said tightly. "If she is still in that room."

If she is still alive.

VIII

IT WAS a wild and desperate chance to take, but we had little to lose. Our minds were reasoning mostly on the subconscious level now, throwing their conclusions into the taut-drawn awareness, and we couldn't stop to follow out that logic. We had to escape.

The car slid down the few blocks to the Rocket Haven, past it, around the corner. Its facade was dark, empty. No one in sight, no one had been summoned, unless they waited in ambush. Regelin rounded the block and stopped in front of the hotel. I got out and dashed inside. The lobby was deserted, only vaguely lit, even the clerk had gone to bed. Shadows flowed monstrously around me as I went up the stairs.

It made sense, I thought somewhere in the thrumming that was my mind. Suppose Gellert was an alien, one who in human form was doing some job for his race—perhaps spying on mankind, or worming his way into our councils, or merely observing. He wouldn't want to reveal his true nature to the Martians, either. He'd acted coolly and boldly—remaining a helpless prisoner till he learned our plans. Then he must have broken loose, overwhelmed Kit, and phoned Alandzu with a warning. But he'd stay alone with her and the child until members of his own race could arrive to hustle them off. He'd assume that Alandzu and the others, prepared for Regelin and me, could handle us. As they damn near had done!

I stopped in front of the door. Empty hall, empty house, silence thick around me; but there was light inside the room. The revolver was heavy in my right hand as my left slid the key into the lock. I turned it as softly as I could, threw the door open, and burst in.

The monster turned and met me with a whistling curse. I barely glimpsed the weapon which one hand swung around. My left closed on that wrist, while my right brought the heavy barrel of my own gun down on the animal snout. The blow shocked back into my muscles and I saw blood. Gellert grunted in pain, shaking that unhuman head, and tried to wrench the alien weapon loose. This time my gun barrel smacked down on the wrist, and at the same time I kneed the creature in the belly. I tore the weapon loose as Gellert lurched back, and brought up my boot, a football kick to the jaw. Gellert fell heavily, twitching and moaning.

Kit was in my arms, then, sobbing uncontrollably. "He grew *thin,*" she gasped. "He made himself *thin.*"

I looked at the strips with which our prisoner had been bound. Yes—that plastic flesh could almost ooze out of such lashings, hurl itself forward to overwhelm unarmed Kit—Alice was clinging to my legs, weeping. "Daddy, daddy!" I picked her up, kissing the wet terrified little face—what a sight it had been for a child!—and gave her back to her mother.

A glance at the door—No one stirred out there. Gellert and I had been equally anxious to keep the fight silent. Whatever Martians had heard it must have decided it was none of their business and gone back to sleep. And I—by God, I *had* my alien!

I kicked the heaving flanks. "Get up," I said. "Get up or I'll shoot you here and now."

Gellert staggered erect. She—yes, *she,* in the torn and now ill-fitting pajamas—grabbed at the wall for support. I stuck her own—gun?—in my belt, and gestured with mine. "Let's go."

She moved slowly forward. She was as squat and powerfully built and rubbery-limbed as the male I'd once seen; the wig had fallen off the crested head, and the little pigment-spots which had given her jaws a man's blueness were absorbed again by the colorless skin, but brows and lashes and body hair, fastened on with infinite skill, still clung. She shambled before me, wiping her bloody muzzle with one seven-fingered hand.

"Reggy's got a car outside," I whispered to Kit. "We'll get this thing to Yeuth like we planned, at his home. After that, he'll protect us till an inquiry can be made."

We went down the stairs again, and out onto the sidewalk—just as a police car drew near. Its probing searchlight dazzled my eyes, wobbled, and held firm. I heard the Martian oath, loud in the night. *"Kevran yantsu!"*

"Into the car!" I gave Kit a shove that sent her spinning forward with Alice in her

arms. Gellert chose that moment to fight, whirling on me and grabbing my gun hand and punching savagely for my face. I launched myself against her, throwing the whole weight of me at her solidity, dropping my gun so I could wrestle.

A pistol cracked, and another and another. A siren began to shriek. I slugged Gellert toward the car. Kit, in the front seat, opened the back door. I got my hands on Gellert's throat and lunged. Both of us toppled into the back seat. Regelin got going. I heard a tommy gun start its yammer.

We fought there in the car, kicking and punching and gouging, while Regelin shot up Seventh. The police beam held us like a long gleaming finger, they roared behind us and their gunner was shooting. I slugged Gellert, hard jolting blows into the rubbery face. A hand was on my throat, clamping shut. I got my teeth on its wrist and bit like a dog.

Kit knelt in the front seat, reaching over and fumbling at us where we struggled in darkness. Her hands closed on the fleshy crest of the alien and she pulled. Gellert snarled in pain, her head yanked upward. My fist slammed into her throat. She had grown claws and begun raking me.

We turned the corner on a wheel and a half and roared up Lyndale. Houses were a blur, fleeing past at 200 miles an hour. The car lurched wildly to avoid a collision, jumped up on a lawn, and bounced down into the street again. The police held steady, fifty yards behind. The ether must be crackling with their calls for help.

One more blow, two, three. Gellert slumped, all at once. I lay there beside her, gasping, darkness whirling in my head.

Consciousness returned. I crawled into the back seat and sat with my feet on Gellert's body, my head in my hands. "I've got the thing covered," said Kit. She was holding Regelin's sidearm, pointing it at the monster.

The car shook to the bursting of machine-gun explosives on its armor. We couldn't hold out long, sooner or later one of them would find a vital part. Or a jet would come overhead and strafe us. I forced full awareness back into my spinning brain.

"If we surrender now—" Regelin's voice was dim under the roaring of cloven air. "We've got the alien here for proof."

I felt the writhing under my feet. The searchlight glare, probing in through our canopy, showed the face of Fred Gellert. The wig was gone, yes—but what Martian had ever paid attention to one little man, enough to remember his appearance?

Kit's voice was thin and savage. "Change back," she said. "Change back, damn you, or you get a bullet in the stomach."

A hoarse defiance: "Do you think that matters to me?"

The car drummed and rattled with the slugs.

I felt the strange gun hard against my belly. "We may have a chance," I said slowly. "I don't know what this thing does, but we can try. We've got no other weapons that'll stop that car."

Regelin nodded bleakly. "Get ready to shoot, then," he said. "I'll let them pull alongside."

He slowed our hurtling pace. The police car drew up, long and lean and black. I rolled down the window. The gun was cold and heavy, awkward in my five-fingered hand, but there seemed to be a firing stud. Gellert cursed, trying to sit up. "Don't," said Kit.

They weren't shooting now, but tommy barrels must be firm on us. I aimed the new gun and pushed the stud.

THERE was no noise, no recoil. But suddenly the other car disintegrated. I saw a flash of smoke and steam and fire, the air was full of flying steel. There was only a heap of fragments and burning fuel between the front and rear ends as Regelin got into full speed again.

We heard the whistling overhead. Looking up, I saw the jet diving. I leaned out the open window, into the ripping wind, and shot again. The jet hailed down on us.

"Okay." Kit's tone was hard. "Let's go."

We had no chance to turn back and try to find Yueth. There was a hornet's nest behind us by now.

We had to run. Already we were out in open country. Regelin turned off on the first side road and sent us bullet-like over dirt and gravel, bearing north.

"I'll cover our friend, Kit," I said wearily. Strength had drained from me with our

escape. It seemed a thousand years since I had eaten or slept, a million since I had known unfrightened peace. "Give me the revolver."

We made Gellert crouch on the floor, in the far corner from me. Kit crawled into the back seat and wiped my face and slashed body, crying. I held her close with one arm while we fled.

It was dawn by this time. Clouds had piled up, and sunrise was hidden by a veil of rain. That was helpful, and we badly needed help just then. It was an hour or so later that we spotted the abandoned farm.

THERE are a lot of them in this north country—weed-grown yards, fields where a thin growth of forest is creeping back, a decayed shack and outbuildings. This one had a fairly good barn, though. We drove in through the sagging doors, stopped, and got out. My legs wobbled under me.

"Kit, you and Alice may as well sleep in the car," said Regelin. His tones were dull with exhaustion. "We shall stay here till nightfall."

Alice whimpered and huddled against her mother. She was shivering, and Kit brought my hand over to feel her forehead. Hot, and the pulse was high. Kit's eyes looked at me out of caverns of shadow.

"Fever," she said. "What shall we do?"

"Wait," I told her. "There's nothing else for us."

"No food, no medicine, no—" She slumped and turned away, carrying the girl in her arms. My face twisted.

The barn was cold and damp, it smelled moldy. Outside, the rain fell strong and steady, veiling the spruce woods, turning the road into mud. Regelin coughed, more miserable even than I.

We sat down. Gellert squatted a few feet away, facing us with a blank expression. I held the revolver loose, ready to shoot if need be.

"Well," said Regelin, "what do we do now?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know."

The rain drummed loud on the roof. Water dripped in through the holes and runneled along the dirt floor.

After a while Regelin smiled. "For a cup of zardak, I think I would trade my ancestry," he said. "If I were also allowed a dish of ruzan, they could have my right arm."

"Bacon and eggs, toast and coffee," I answered.

We were beginning to revive a little. Hunger was fading to a weariness within us, muscle aches becoming a throb instead of a pain, numbed minds clearing. I felt some return of decisiveness.

"We're not too badly off," I said. "We're still alive and free, more or less, and we've got the prisoner we wanted, even if we can't deliver her as yet. We'll think of something."

Regelin's eyes hardened, and he slanted his antennae toward Gellert. "Yes," he said bleakly, "I think we may as well hold an interrogation."

A smile crossed the pseudo-human face. "If you think I am afraid of you—" said Gellert.

"Look," I told her, "we're not sadists. We have no desire to use torture. Nevertheless, this seems to be an issue transcending such scruples."

"It is for me too," said Gellert quietly.

"Why don't you tell us your real name, at least?" asked Regelin in an almost casual tone.

She shrugged. "If you wish. I am called Radeef l'al Kesshub." That is the nearest I can come to those thick syllables. I noticed the throat contracting as she said them; human vocal cords couldn't master those noises.

"Now look," I said, "we already know you must come from the stars, and that you've used your peculiar powers to infiltrate the governments of both planets. You've egged them on to a war in which you were the real victors. We can also safely assume that there are not too many of you; otherwise, with a weapon like this gun, you could have taken over openly. So you see, we already have the basic facts, and the rest is largely a matter of satisfying our own curiosity."

"Remain curious, then," said Radeef sullenly.

"This gun, now." I turned the squat thing over in my free hand. "How does it work?"

"You expect me to give away military secrets of my people?"

"They may not be so secret as you think."

Odd how cold and clear my brain was. "I can make an informed guess about this weapon. Both Earth nad Mars have been experimenting with sub-molar forces, with a view to designing frictionless machines. I've studied some of the declassified results. In theory, it should be possible to generate a dense force-field and project it from some such instrument as this. That would be noiseless and recoilless, too. When the field, sent out in a tight beam, encounters solid matter, it reacts with the intermolecular forces and yields its energy to the molecules themselves. They fly apart with fantastic violence—in all directions, to conserve momentum, but mostly, if the gun is well-designed, in a plane normal to the force beam. Theoretically, the object struck should be reduced to gas, single molecules and atoms; in practice, obviously, it disintegrates into small chunks. Molecular bonds being strong, the chunks don't get far apart, maybe only a few inches, and there isn't much noise. The object just—falls apart."

Radeef remained silent.

"Why are you doing it?" asked Regelin, very softly. "What harm have we ever done to you?"

"You exist," said Radeef. But it was not a malevolent statement, somehow. I thought I heard vague regret in it.

"I don't think you are the vanguard of an interstellar invasion," I went on. "Even if logistics permitted such an operation, there is the question of motive. No reason why a highly advanced culture should have to conquer anyone else. It'd be much easier to make what they needed right at home. Or if you *had* to overrun somebody, it wouldn't be a powerful civilization nearly as far along as your own. You'd pick on backward races, primitives, wouldn't you?

"In short, I doubt that this is an invasion or the preparation for one. I think you're a private group, acting on your own, a sort of filibustering expedition. And you had to tackle us because you had no choice; if you have any sense, you'd much rather deal with savages or barbarians. So—were you marooned here?"

No answer. I hated to use the third degree; it probably wouldn't accomplish anything, anyway.

"What puzzles me," said Regelin, "is why Dzuga should have changed to his natural form when you hit him. None of the others did, you know—blows, bullets, death itself, didn't make them revert. What was there peculiar about your assault on Dzuga?"

"Heat?" I wondered. "He got burned, you know."

"Possibly. Though it seems precarious. It is too easy, these days, for anyone to touch hot metal. And if you stop to think about it, David, a bullet in the body generates considerable heat."

"Then—"

Lightning glared outside, and thunder boomed after, trembling in the rickety old barn.

"Electric shock!"

Regelin nodded. "Yes," he said, "I think that must be the answer. We can try it out easily enough."

Radeef flinched, snarling. "Go ahead," she jeered. "Waste your time."

"We have nothing else to waste," said Regelin mildly.

HE GUARDED our prisoner while I went to the car after supplies. There was a Martian flashlight with its powerful 12.3-volt battery. I took out the lens, bulb, and reflector, and used the car's complete repair kit to bolt the tube to a three-foot length of broomstick which some scratching around in the barn turned up. On either side of the stick I taped spare cables for the husky dieselectric engine, from the battery to the end of the stick, with the wires bared a few inches beyond the end. When I touched them and pressed the button, I felt a tingling jolt. It didn't seem like much, but—

"Come here," I said.

Radeef snarled and backed away. Regelin followed, covering her with his gun. I forced her into a corner and jabbed.

The shock rippled through her, body shrinking and thickening, face melting, crest rising out of the naked shape-changing skull. She cursed and fought for balance, flowing back toward human shape. I shocked her again, batting aside the hands that clawed for my rod. Radeef spat and gave up, assuming the alien form.

I turned with a high sense of victory to look at Regelin. "That's it," I said. "That's

how we prove our story. It's also the simple test by which all of them can be flushed out."

"Hm. Yes." Regelin studied our enemy thoughtfully. "Though I rather imagine that the intricate details of histology, and even the internal organs, cannot change so readily as the outer shape. Is that true?"

Something seemed to collapse in Radeef. She sat down and buried her face in her hands. Her angry defiance had been long and brave, but she'd had a rough time of it too.

"Yes," she whispered. "We can adjust the oxygen system to a wide range of different atmospheres, but otherwise, if you dissected the abdominal cavity of one of us, or looked at the brain, or got some cells under a microscope, you would find it unalterable —not Earthling or Martian."

"X-rays, then," said Regelin. "Another test."

"But all the men in both our armed services got those," I protested.

"Yes, but the aliens have been high officers, remember. They could easily arrange for their physical checkups to be made by doctors who were of their own race. Then the only danger is that one of them might die in battle or accident and be, ah, looked into. But that isn't a great risk; who would look closely at an unpleasantly mangled heap of intestines?"

I stared at our captive where she huddled at my feet. "Where are you from, Radeef?" I asked softly.

She didn't look up, and her voice was a whisper. "Sirius."

"And why did you come here? What do you want of us?"

"It began long ago," she said. "Two hundred or more years ago. There are four intelligent races in the Sirian System. They had advanced about as far as you have now—ahead in some ways, behind in others, but on the whole your equals. There was a great war in that system. The people of Sha-eb were masters of biology, they have created things you do not yet dream of at Sol. They wanted spies and infiltrators. They developed us, as artifical mutations."

I shook my head, stricken quiet by the vastness of it. Not only the immense way to Sirius, almost nine light-years of utter black distance; not only the concept of other races, other civilizations, isolated in loneliness throughout that enormous dark; no, it was the achievement of Sha-eb. I knew enough biology to realize what was called for in such a protean being: pigmentation cells; flexible tissue; a fantastic calcium system which could grow bones and teeth to order, within seconds (probably depositing them around a cartilaginous base already there, I thought; the calcium-holding cells would be enbedded in the cartilage itself); a still stranger nervous system which could control that intricacy down to the minutest details—

No wonder an electric shock would upset the equilibrium. Nerve currents are themselves electrical. The unbelievable thing was that the duplicate was so stable to all other influences.

"How long did it take them to create your race?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said tonelessly. "A decade, perhaps. They used forced-growth techniques. They could manipulate individual genes. We don't know their science any more than you do."

She sighed. "With our help, as well as its other weapons, Sha-eb was victorious. Peace was firmly established in the Sirian System. And we, the changelings, we were not needed any more. We were feared, hated, discriminated against, forbidden to assume the shape of any—natural—race. As if all life were not born of the same forces! At last we were forbidden children, we must die out.

"We banded together, secretly, and tried to seize the government of Sha-eb, using our power of disguise. It failed. Most of us were killed. Some of us managed to seize a great spaceship which was to be used for exploring the outer planets. We fled the Sirian System altogether, such few of us as remained. Sol was our choice, because astronomers believed that single stars have more planets. We would have a better chance of finding a home. The voyage lasted almost a hundred years, with most of us spending the time in suspended animation to stretch out the meager supplies." She chuckled drearily. "Why do I say 'us'? I wasn't born yet. But we Tahowwa think of ourselves as a race. It has to be us few,

banded against a universe that has no room for us.

"Fifty years ago, we entered the Solar System. Secretly, we scouted it. We found only Earth and Mars fit habitations; everywhere else, we have to live penned in steel and plastic, sunless, windless, dead metal and no earth we could call our own. Carefully, assuming native forms, we studied your worlds. There was no place for us. We might be welcomed, yes, we might even be given a few small reservations to live on, but that was not enough. Always there would be the watchfulness and the unvoiced fear; who could ever wholly trust us? We wanted a planet to call *ours*. One where we could live openly, as masters, in our natural shapes, where we could bear children and raise them to be free. You cannot know that hunger, you who belong. We have always been the disinherited.

"Some wanted to push on, some wanted to reveal themselves openly, but the final vote was for remaining here and fighting—in our own peculiar fashion. There are heavy armaments in the great spaceship, where it circles beyond Pluto; if Earth and Mars could be pulled down far enough, we could finish the job ourselves.

"I need not describe the details of the past fifty years. You can guess them, I suppose. We few thousand worked long, laying the ground. One by one, after they were known in full, high officials of both planets were quietly assassinated with their families—by their guards, who were our people. Their places were taken by us. It has required every member of our race. Children are almost born into their work, raised in secret places and thrown into the task before they are fully mature. I have borne children myself, and not seen them since. It is not easy."

Her voice faded out. The rain roared down, and streamers of mist curled through the barn's gloom.

"And now," I said slowly, "you have broken Earth. Not quite, we could still recover fast if we had a chance, but Mars will soon reduce us to helplessness. Then what plans do you have for Mars?"

She didn't answer that.

Regelin's chuckle was harsh. "Conquered," he said. "Conquered by refugees!"

"It's a common enough process in history," I answered. "Look at Rome: the Goths were running from the Huns, who'd been kicked out by the Chinese. Only these —Tahowwa—are smarter about it. They let us do their fighting for them."

"So few of them," said Regelin between his teeth. "So few, so thinly scattered, so easily unmasked if you only knew what to look for. And still we are helpless against them. It is maddening."

"We'll have to keep trying," I said. "A long-distance call to Yueth? No, the lines are down. A letter? I imagine the mail of all non-aliens of rank is monitored. An attempt to sneak back into the city? Hopeless. But we'll think of something. We've got to find a way."

I turned and went over to the car at Alice's cry. Kit held the little girl close. She was crying herself. Alice babbled something I couldn't follow, but there was delirium in it.

IX

AFTER dark we drove further, not very sure of just where we were and not feeling that it mattered a great deal. It was about ten when we came into a village, a few houses and a general store and a bank and a farm dealer. Regelin halted out of sight while I went to knock on the door of a lighted home. A man came out, and I stood with my face in shadow and asked the way to the doctor's. "Had a little accident," I said. "Got lost in the woods and fell and hurt my arm."

He squinted, trying to discern me. "Where you from?" he asked. I imagine news was very scarce here, with mail service irregular and only the official Martian telecasts.

"I'm on the road," I said. "Came through Duluth, but there weren't any jobs there, so I drifted further."

"You been drifting a long ways, then. "I could almost read his mind: *This guy might turn thief. He might already have stolen.*

"I got an uncle in North Dakota who'll fix me up when I get there," I said. "Now where's the doctor, please?"

"Two houses down. His name's Hansen, Bill Hansen."

"Thanks." I turned away, wondering how much I'd betrayed myself. My accent was Eastern, though the years in space had blurred it.

There was darkness in the doctor's home. We parked across the road, under a gloom of trees, and I went and knocked again. I hoped he was in.

Alice whimpered in my arms. Her eyes were bright and blank, they no longer recognized me.

A window opened overhead. "Who's there?" An old man's voice, but still firm and resonant.

"A patient for you," I answered as quietly as possible. "Emergency."

"Okay, I'll be right down."

The town had electric light, which was unusual; I suppose they'd managed to build a wood-burning generator. The glow from the opened door was sharp in my eyes, and I stepped swiftly inside and closed the door behind me.

Hansen stood looking me over. He was a lean, somehow aristocratic man, white-haired, his face gaunt and seamed, his eyes blue and steady behind old-fashioned glasses. He'd pulled trousers over his pajamas but not stopped for anything else.

"The kid's sick," I said. "Been running a fever for a good twelve hours, and delirious by now."

"Hm." He took Alice gently in his arms and bore her into the living room. "Switch off the hall light, will you? We're only allowed one bulb at a time." He laid her on the couch and opened his bag. I stood in the doorway, watching him work, thinking of Kit sitting out there and holding Regelin's hand because there was nothing else for her to hold to, nothing in all the world.

Hansen finished his examination and turned to me. "How'd she get this way?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" I replied.

"It sure does. I have to know what she's been through."

"All right." I dropped one hand into my jacket pocket, where it closed on Regelin's gun. "She's been sketchily fed on whatever we could give her, for weeks. She hasn't gotten anything for the past two days, because we didn't have anything. She's been badly frightened, time and again. She's had inadequate sleep. She's been in a cold, damp place all this day. That enough?"

He regarded me for a long time. I must have looked rather unhealthy myself, thin and hollow about the eyes, dirty and unshaven. "It is, Mr. Arnfeld," he answered. "I understand."

"So you've heard those alarms too?"

"How could I avoid it? It was on the nationwide 'casts for days. Only this morning it came on again, with the information that you'd committed murder in the Twin Cities and were believed to have fled northward."

I shrugged. "All right. But what about the kid?"

"Bad case of flu, and it might be complicated by bronchial pneumonia. People who treat children this way ought to be shot." He said it evenly, without rancor, but there was no smile on his face.

"We hadn't any chocie," I replied. "Those who're after us wouldn't have cared for her at all, except maybe dig her grave."

"Well," he said, "I think I can pull her out of this. We've no penicillin here, but I do have a good supply of abiotin, and it'll take worse cases than hers. But she's going to need absolute rest, with care and good food, for quite a while."

"I'm afraid we're broke," I said. "Nor do I imagine we can stay here very long."

"Hardly." He picked up the girl again. "Why not bring your friends inside while I start tending to her?"

"And have you call the sheriff? We'd have to fight him too, and we've done enough harm."

"Don't be stupider than you can help, Arnfeld. Anyway—" this time he did grin— "I'd kind of like to hear your story."

I went out and fetched them while he carried Alice upstairs. As the door closed behind us, he emerged on the landing and stood there unmoving, his imperturbability shaken.

Surely we were a strange crew. I looked like any tramp, but there was Kit, with her lithe form and loose golden hair and pale, thin, lovely face; Regelin towering over us, dark, amber-eyed, somber in the Martian uniform that still held its hard neatness; and Radeef the monster, shuffling before us at gun point, snouted unhuman head bent

so the light glistened off her crested skull. Against that quiet middle-class home, we were like invaders from somewhere outside all reality.

Hansen drew a long breath. "All right," he said. "Sit down and wait a while. Will you help me with the girl, ma'am?"

Kit ran up the stairs, almost falling in her urgency.

It seemed a long time before they came down again. Hansen was smiling and nodding. "I've given her the first injections," he said. "She's resting easy and should start mending pretty quick." His eyes swiveled around among us. "I dareasy you could all use some supper. Come on into the kitchen and I'll fix it."

While he prepared the meal, we outlined the story for him. I don't imagine he, or any sane being, would have believed it without the sight of Radeef squatting on the floor. As it was, he became very still, only asking a few questions to clear up some points. At the end, he compressed his lips and shook his head.

"It's a terrible thing to learn," he said.

"You needn't fear, doctor," said Radeef suddenly. "It happens not to be true. Actually—"

"Go ahead," I ordered her. "Change your form."

She grinned at me. "How can I? What you say is obviously impossible." Turning to Hansen: "Doctor, the truth is, briefly, this. I am from Sirius, yes, belonging to crew of explorers who arrived only a few months ago. We contacted the Martian government, since that was the only effective one left, and—"

"She's lying!" Kit's voice was shrill and ragged. "She'll make us out to be crazy, when we—we—"

"Oh, no," said Radeef. "They are fairly sane. But the political situation is—peculiar. Normally we would invite Mars to join the interstellar union which already comprises a dozen stars, and the Archon is, indeed, anxious to do so. However, a powerful group is in strong opposition to the surrender of sovereignty this would entail, so the Archon's party has had to negotiate secretly, to present them with a *fait accompli*. Getting wind of this, the opposition tried to break it up and create ill will by murdering and kidnapping members of our crew. This is the only case in which they have succeeded."

Hansen looked steadily at all of us. "Why should Earthlings help then?" he asked.

An owl somewhere outside hooted loudly, very loudly in the stillness.

RADEEF shrugged. "It is difficult to say, especially when one considers the benefits Earth would derive. You would not have to be kept subjugated, you know, since with the Solar System in our union Mars would have no reason to fear Earth. I imagine these people were bought by promises of rewards."

"Hansen," I said, "I fought for Earth since I was sixteen years old."

"So he claims," said Radeef. "And even if true, what of it? He was drafted, or would have been."

Nightmare. What to do, how to convince this old man, or force him, or—? We couldn't stay here, guarding him, without being discovered; we couldn't take him captive with us, for Alice's sake—what to *do?*

Regelin's harsh laugh broke the waiting. *"Aklan tubat!"* he exclaimed. "I can admire you for that attempt, Radeef. However—" He leaned forward, hard and chill. "You say it is impossible for you to change your from as we claim?"

"Of course," said Radeef. "Dr. Hansen, as a medical man you—"

Regelin lunged. One foot smacked her against the wall, holding her pinioned, while his left hand grabbed her arm and stretched it out. The right, in the same blurring motion, snatched a sizzling skillet off the stove and brought it savagely down against the captive arm.

It happened so fast that her reaction was sheer reflex. The arm stretched itself, grew thin and long, jerking back from the pan Regelin laughed again and let her go, banging the skillet back into place. Radeef snarled and restored herself. "Doctor," she cried, "It's true we can—"

"Never mind," said Hansen. "It was a nice try you made."

He turned back to the stove. "I think supper's about ready," he said mildly.

Afterward we went into the living room and sighed, our tired bodies seeming to melt into the chairs. Hansen paced up and down,

hands behind his back, trying to think of a plan for us.

"The ordinary police won't do," he said. "They'd almost certainly report the affair to Martian GHQ, like they're supposed to, and then the invaders need only murder them as well as you people. Even if the cops keep the secret, how can anyone be contacted who matters?

"If the Commandant himself is an invader, then the true Martian officer who believes your story will have to organize a coup—a mutiny. It'll have to be done so smoothly that no other headquarters, on Earth or Luna or Mars, knows about it before something can be done against them. All that will need time."

"Yueth dzu Talazan," said Regelin. "He is our main hope. I am quite sure he is a true Martian, for he is not high-ranking enough to call for a substitute; and at the same time he is a bold, able officer. If he could be convinced—"

"Well," said Hansen, "I can try and get a message to him. You write something that'll bring him to you alone, or with only a few trusted friends—and secretly, of course. Then you can show him this—Radeef. After that, he may be able to shelter you somewhere while he goes to work against the enemy."

"If you expect me to be fooled again," snapped Radeef, "I feel sorry for all of you!"

"Oh, there are other ways," said Hansen evenly. "Your metabolism is obviously much like ours, apart from the cell-control characteristics. I'm pretty sure scopolamine or some similar drug would work on you. Or a good husky insulin shock would probably make you go into form-changing convulsions."

She didn't glare this time. There was a sudden forlornness about her. I wouldn't have liked to be a prisoner of desperate alien enemies.

"Well—" Regelin rubbed his forehead, above antennae that drooped with weariness. "Well, I can write Yueth a letter, telling him the story and begging him in the name of our old friendship to come see for himself. I think he would, even if he did not believe. He is that sort. But how to get the message to him, secretly—?"

"I'm needed here," said Hansen, "but I could arrange to have the letter delivered. There's a smart young kid here who sometimes works for me and would love a chance to go to the cities. I could tell him some story about having heard, from a Martian passing through town tonight in the search for you—that'd explain the car as well, if anyone's noticed it—I could tell him of having heard that this Yueth can arrange for penicillin distribution and that I'm appealing for a little. God knows I could use it!"

An eagerness lifted within me, but I had to fight it down: "The Martians will know that's ridiculous. Yueth is in Intelligence."

"But they don't have to know. That's just the story I tell the kid, and I'll ask him to keep mum. As far as the Martians will know, it'll only be a personal message to Yueth. I daresay their officers get quite a few from humans, begging for this or that."

"Unven!" Regelin's eyes blazed. "I think you have the answer, doctor. I think we can do it!"

"All right, then. There's my desk. Write your letter."

While Regelin's tall form folded itself awkwardly around the human furniture, Hansen turned to me. "You can't stay here, of course," he said. "I couldn't possibly conceal you, and there are people in this village who'd cheerfully betray you for the reward. Let's arrange a hiding place where you can go. Yueth can come to me, and I can direct him further."

"Okay," I said. "Where?"

He smiled. "You look like you could use a little rest and food yourself, son. Why not take a few days off and go fishing? I have a cabin about a hundred miles from here, up in the Arrowhead country. I'll bet nobody else is closer than twenty miles. Good place to hide."

"Alice—" began Kit.

"She'll have to stay here. It'll be safer for her anyway. I can hide one child all right. She'll be taken care of and get well, I promise you."

Kit nodded, slowly and mutely.

"And you'll need food, too," said Hansen. "I got a lot of canned goods and vegetables and stuff down in the cellar. Help me load it in your car."

"But you have to eat, too—" I said.

"I'll make out. Come on, now, hop to it."

We got several cases into the vehicle, moving with immense quiet not to wake the sleeping homes around us. "That'll do for a couple of weeks," said Hansen finally. "You ought to catch enough fish to stretch it out, too. Never saw such a lake for northerns."

We returned to the house and he drew me a map. I folded it up and said: "Doctor, I've no good way of saying thanks."

"Then don't," he grunted.

Regelin finished his letter, sealed it in an envelope, and addressed it to Yueth at his private quarters. Kit rose and started up the stairs. "Come along, Dave, will you?" she asked.

We stood for a while over Alice. The girl was sleeping peacefully now, and I thought she looked less feverish. Kit stooped over and kissed her. "So long, brat," she whispered. "I love you very much."

We went back downstairs. Regelin was waiting. He bowed formally to Hansen, giving him the Martian salute of respect, and Kit and I shook his hand. Then we herded Radeef out into the car and started our journey again.

X

A COUPLE of times we lost our way, and there was a bad moment when a jet swooped low overhead—Regelin heard it from far away, and we pulled off the road under some trees and crouched there to wait; but it flashed on by. Still, we reached the cabin well before sunrise, with about two drops left in the fuel tank. "There can be no more running for us," said Regelin.

Kit stood under tall windy trees and drew a lungful of the air that blew in from the lake. "I'm not sorry," she answered.

There was a woodshed in which we could hide the car. The keys let us into a four-room cottage, neat and compact and gracefully furnished. Regelin and I stood watch over Radeef till dawn, while Kit slept like a tired child.

Sunrise came in a shout of light. The long grass outside was one glitter from dew, and the lake rippled and flashed beyond a screen of spruce and beech and sumac. It smelled of growth here, green leaves, needles and forest mould, water and sunlight.

After breakfast, I studied the woodshed again. It was as sturdy as the cottage against which it was built, a ram would be needed to break it down, and it had a concrete floor. I took the car out again, standing it by the house and chopping branches to conceal it; then I moved a cot and a few other necessities into the shed, and made Radeef enter.

She sat down on the cot and changed her face so it could smile. I suppose she meant it well, though it was frightening to watch. "If I must be imprisoned," she said, "it could be worse."

"We can't hold a gun on you all the time," I said. "We'll keep you in food and so on till Yueth gets here—that'll take a week or so, I guess, since Hansen's messenger will have to go on horseback. Want some books? There's a small library in the cabin."

"No," she said. "We Tahowwa don't mind just sitting and thinking. But thank you."

"I wish you hadn't been so—conquest-minded," I said awkwardly. "You probably aren't a bad race. If you'd come to us openly, we'd have provided something for you."

Bitterly: "Yes—a charity ward."

"Well," I said, "I imagine a few of you will survive anyway. Most of you, even, if you surrender once the game is up."

"Which it isn't, yet."

"No, I'm afraid it isn't. Want to tell me anything more about yourself and your people, Radeef?"

"No. Please go away."

I padlocked the door and returned to the cabin. I wanted to sleep, but my nerves were still drawn too thin. Regelin was more resilient, he was already stretched out with his legs reaching over the end of the bunk. Kit and I made the cabin shipshape and then went for a swim.

"I'll take this side of the point," I said, "and you can have the other."

She cocked her head at me. "Dave," she said, "you're an awful prude at heart, you know that?"

The water was cold, transparent as glass, sliding sensuously along the skin and tingling in the blood. We came out laughing, for the first time in a long while, and lay down on the grassy bank and let the sun have us. It felt strange not to be skulking about after dark.

"I wonder how Alice is," said Kit presently.

"She's okay," I answered. "She'll miss you, of course, but Hansen is a nice old codger. And with luck, you should see her again inside a couple of weeks."

"Or never—No!" She shook her head till the blonde hair flew. "I won't think about it."

I laid my hand on hers, and then I kissed her. She responded with a sudden wild hunger.

In the afternoon Regelin and I hunted up the boat, where it lay under a lean-to, and took the doctor's fishing tackle out on the lake. It was wide and empty there, ringed in with forest and roofed with sky, everywhere was quietness. We brought in a pike and some smaller fish, and Kit had found a blueberry patch, so that was a cheerful supper.

Kit said, next morning, that she'd slept poorly—nightmares plagued her, now that the pressure was off but the danger not over. I took her for a long walk, clear around the lake. We passed a few other cabins, but they were all deserted; this place was too far from civilization to be accessible nowadays. We talked of many things, there under the dappled shadows, and I need not repeat them, except that at the end Kit whispered to me: "Why wait, Dave? We may be dead tomorrow. Why should we wait?"

We came back toward sunset. Regelin sat on the porch reading a book. He regarded us gravely and shrewdly, as we approached hand in hand. Finally he smiled.

"Earth," he said, clearing his throat, "is now under Martian law, and there is one item in the code of which you may not have heard. A military officer is empowered to perform marriages. Does that interest you?"

Does it?" I whooped, and Kit ran to kiss him.

None of us could remember just how the Christian ceremony went, but we stumbled through it as well as we could. Then Regelin said the Martian words, translating them for us afterward—strange to hear them under the sky and in the bowers of Earth, but they had an austere pagan beauty I cannot forget. Afterward we had a wedding supper, opening the bottle of cheap wine which Hansen had thrown into one of his boxes, and then Regelin said he'd always wanted to try moonlight fishing and this was his chance.

It was a strange honeymoon, but we didn't think much about that. Perhaps the fact of our having it on the edge of darkness made it sweeter for us, though that hardly seems possible. I am afraid that Regelin was rather neglected, though it was partly his own fault—he was so seldom around.

Kit, my dearest, if you should ever read this, remember those days and nights. Remember that I will always love you.

I FOUND other things to do, now and then. For one, I investigated the Sirian weapon as much as I dared. It seemed to be what I had theorized, a super-powerful and compact version of the Colson resonator with a projector for the generated force-field. Its charge was a coil of some wire which fed into the firing chamber an inch at a time and disappeared on my shooting the gun; I suspect it was an alloy in an abnormal energy state, though how produced and maintained in its metastable condition I cannot say. There was also an adjustment stud which could regulate the width of the force-beam—broad for a lesser effect over a wider area, to kill a man noiselessly by disrupting cell nuclei, without leaving much outward mark on him; narrow for a hard, cracking discharge which would blow a thin section almost to atoms at longer range, without disturbing anything beyond that circle of destruction. A lovely, versatile weapon! And the principle would have innumerable uses for peace-time industry, I thought with a stinging regret.

From time to time, also, we worried about Hansen's message. There was so much which could go wrong and bring death down on our heads. We arranged defenses for the house, to give a decent account of ourselves if it should come to that.

We took the heavy machine-gun off our

stolen car and mounted it in the front door, behind a barricade of earth-filled sacks and boxes. The windows all had burglar-proof shutters, closing from the inside, through which we drilled loopholes—except in the kitchen window. Our theory was that if we were attacked, one of us at the machine-gun could hold the lake entrance, and one in the rear of the house defend the two bedrooms; the third would be off duty in the kitchen, prepare food or sleep, and could give warning of any funny business in that sector.

I also dug up a permapen and this old notebook (did it belong to a child of Hansen's once? I do not know. Perhaps I will never know.), and spent a few hours each day recording everything which has led up to this moment. If we should, after all our striving, fail, I can perhaps hide the book; it might give a clue to someone in the future who chances across it, and he might resume our work. A silly thing to do, I suppose, but—

I have just added a foreword. It is my time off watch, and I should sleep, but I cannot. For us, now, the end is close, and I have written that fact in bitterness. Now let me go back and finish our story.

It was nine days after our arrival. I was sitting on the lakeshore, enjoying the afternoon sunlight, when Regelin's long shadow fell athwart me. "Hullo, old chap," he said. "Where's the wife?"

"You've been reading too many English novels," I answered. "As a matter of fact, she shooed me out of the house; said her hair was a mess and she wasn't ready yet to spring anything so unglamorous on me as whatever it is she does to it."

He stretched out on the grass beside me.

"I wonder what is delaying Yueth?" he asked.

"No telling. But he couldn't just up and leave, I imagine. If he's to come secretly, he has to arrange things so he can go away on some ostensible business." I scowled, not wanting to think about the realities.

"Even so—" Regelin sat up, cocking his ears toward the western sky. "What's that?"

"Hm?" I could only hear the wind in the leaves and the small wavelets lapping on the shore.

"It's a jet—quick! Under cover!"

We rolled over, scrambled to our feet, and ran. We were hardly on the cabin porch when I heard the noise above my suddenly racketing heart. The jet, a Martian scout, swooped low overhead, almost skimming the lake. In moments it was beyond the horizon.

Kit came out and held me close. "What is it?" she whispered. "What do they want?"

"Maybe nothing, honey," I said, but I exchanged a grim look with Regelin over her shoulder. There was no reason why the occupation forces should fly over the Arrowhead, and Yueth would not send an advance scout.

The Martian drew me aside. "I don't like this very much," he said. "I wonder if one or two of us shouldn't slip away now, in case—"

I shook my head. "Wouldn't do much good, Reggy. If Yueth himself is coming, it's pointless; and if it's the enemy, whoever escapes will only be hunted down as we were before." Clenching my fists: "I'm tired of running. Let's have it out now, once and for all."

He nodded, wordlessly, and I went back to Kit. We sat on the porch for a long time, holding hands and saying little.

The sun declined, shadows crept over the land. It was three hours later that Regelin came back to us from the woods. "I've heard a car approaching," he said.

"Well—" I got up, stretching to ease the tautness in me. "This is the end, then, one way or another." I ruffled Kit's hair with one hand, and we went into the cabin. Regelin stayed on the porch, a rifle from Alandzu's car at his side.

The new automobile drove out of screening brush and came to a halt. It was a fast, armed vehicle, a heavier version of the one we had stolen. Looking through a loophole in a shuttered window, I saw half a dozen Martian shapes in it. One of them got out, a tall being in uniform. "Regelin," he called. "Regelin dzu Coruthan?"

"It is Yueth," our friend said to us; but his voice was not lightened. Then he broke into Vannzaru, the message we had agreed on: "I am glad you came, old comrade, but we can only show this to you. Come forward alone, into the house."

There was a crisp answer which Regelin translated: "He refuses. He says he doubts

our story even now, and cannot trust us not to kill hm. We must come out to them."

"Nothing doing," snapped Kit.

They bargained for a while. Finally Regelin said to us: "I have agreed to let him bring two companions inside. Be prepared for—anything."

"Get into the bedroom, Kit," I whispered. "Leave the door ajar. Cover us." She nodded and disappeared. I stood waiting, the electric stick hidden behind my back.

Regelin preceded the three Martians inside. They looked about with wary eyes, their guns held alertly. When they saw that I was unarmed and that Regelin had stood his rifle against the wall, they relaxed a little. Regelin kept them moving, talking fast, herding them toward the kitchen and the shed behind it.

YUETH brushed me as he went by. I whirled the stick from its concealment and jabbed it against his hand and squeezed the button. Even as he yelled and his face dissolved toward otherness, I was plunging against him.

I hit him with my shoulder and we went down on the floor, cursing and struggling. Regelin sprang aside and Kit's gun barked. The two soldiers fell, clawing at their weapons. She stepped forth and fired again and again until they were still.

I rolled over, clutching for the neck of the false Yueth. His body was frozen in form, half Martian and half Tahowwan. I slugged hard, behind the ear. He spat blood as I hit him in the mouth. Dimly I heard an explosive crash: Regelin had fired out at the car with the Sirian gun, blowing it apart.

I got my knee on my opponent's stomach, my hands about his throat, and banged his head against the floor. After a moment he was still. I crouched over him, sobbing breath into my lungs. The guns were talking again, I heard bullets thud against the cabin.

"Dave, Dave, Dave!" Kit was bending over me, weeping. "Are you all right, Dave?"

"Yeah," I muttered, leaning on her as I climbed to my feet. "I'm okay."

Regelin turned a bleak face to me from the window. "I got one of the others with their car," he said, "there are two left, circling around the brush. Get to the defenses."

I dragged the pseudo-Yueth, who was beginning to stir and groan, into the kitchen; opening the shed door, I flung him in with Radeef, then I locked the door again and returned to pick up a gun.

THE sun was very low now, and the lake a blaze of gold. I heard birdsong in the trees, unfrightened by our warring. There was no sign of the enemy.

Kit searched the bodies of the two she had killed, throwing their weapons onto those I had taken from "Yueth." There were three automatic pistols and two Sirian disintegrators, all told, added to the guns we already had. They would be useful.

"Let's take our defense positions," I said woodenly.

"We've failed." Kit shook her head, a sudden enormous weariness seemed to have fallen on her. "After all our trying, we've failed. Now what do we do?"

"We keep fighting," said the Martian. "I am still of the Regelin dzu clan."

"And something may turn up, if we hold out long enough," I mumbled.

We waited for a long while as darkness grew around us. Once I left my post for Kit to hold and went into the kitchen and opened the shed door. Two Tahowwan forms moved through the shadows, toward me. This way was their only escape, we'd fastened the outward door tightly. I gestured them back with my automatic.

"What is your real name, stranger?" I asked. "We don't want to use Yueth. He was Regelin's comrade."

"I am called Naseer." The answer was sullen, out of thick gloom. "I advise you to give up now. Your position is hopeless."

"Not yet it isn't. But as a matter of curiosity, how did you find us?"

"It was clear you would try to communicate with someone of rank, and Yueth was known to be an old friend of Regelin's. We intercepted the message you sent to him. Then we went to Hansen and questioned him with the help of drugs."

"I suppose Yueth and Hansen are both dead?"

Indifferently: "Of course. As you will be, unless you surrender quickly."

"The—child? The one who was with Hansen?"

"No, there was no reason to injure her. She knows nothing."

"Thanks for that much." I locked the door on them and went back to the others and told them what I'd learned.

"Now we have to try to slip away, before they close the ring on us," said Regelin.

"I'll bet they've done so already," I answered. "This is too big for them to take chances. The only hope for us that I can see is to put up a hell of a good fight when they attack. Maybe we can break their lines enough to slip through in the confusion."

We waited.

Toward midnight, another car arrived, and a light tank trundled behind it. I saw the armor gleaming vaguely by starlight. Kit woke up from a troubled sleep, and we crouched at the loopholes, watching. A Tahowwa—none of them bothered to change shape now—climbed out of the automobile and through the long wet grass, holding a white flag. Regelin stepped out to parley.

"If you do not surrender," said the alien, "we will have to destroy you. A single shell from that tank can blow your cabin apart."

"Then why don't you start shelling at once?" asked Regelin coldly.

"For the sake of the prisoner, or prisoners, you hold. We are prepared to bargain. Your lives for theirs."

Even if you kept the bargain," said Regelin, "I do not fancy prison life. Go away."

The Tahowwa removed himself. I took aim with a Sirian gun and fired. The vehicles were just out of effective range. Narrowing the beam to a needle point, I tried again. I cut a line up the armored side of the tank. Its engine roared as it started to back. I hit its big gun, and the long barrel slumped.

Triumph was savage in me. "So much for their shells!" I called.

"Take your posts!" Regelin's voice snapped out of darkness. "There are foot soldiers approaching!"

XI

THEY came in a silent wave, rushing out of shadows toward the walls of the cabin. We used disintegrators at wide beam, firing again and again. I saw them blown apart, spattered, destroyed, heaped under our eaves, and still they came. Behind me, in the front entrance, Regelin sat at a raving machine-gun.

The bullets were a steady hail against our walls. Now and then flame throwers opened up, trying to burn us. But chemically hardened timber is like concrete. We stood them off, shooting, shooting, and in the end they withdrew. Then there was only silence and starlight, blood and dew.

I could not see Sirius among the constellations, but I thought of it like an ominous eye in heaven. *Why did you do it?* I raged within myself. *Why did you wish them on us?*

"I think it's over for now," said Kit. Her voice was small and trembling in the shadow that filled our house. "I think they've given up."

"Maybe so," I answered gently. "Get some sleep, darling."

"I wonder—" Regelin's tone was almost musing. I saw him etched black in the doorway against the star-clouds. "I wonder why they are doing it this way. We took a frightful toll. There must be a score dead out there. And there are not so many of them in the Solar System that they can be reckless with troops. Why don't they just annihilate us with a bomb or shell?"

"I think I can guess," I answered slowly. "A modern high explosive would leave this place in splinters. There'd be nothing identifiable remaining. And they don't know if we're all here. For all they know, we split up while we were waiting for Yueth, and one of us is still at large. . . . Nor can they be sure how many people we've told our story to. They want to be sure they have all of us, and preferably at least one of us alive for questioning."

"That sounds reasonable. But they won't sacrifice everything to that purpose. Before long, they will take their chances on blowing us up."

"Yeah. We've got to get one or more of us away before then, to try and spread the word. We should have done that before, I suppose, but—well, too late now."

The long night wore on. We could hear them moving out there, crashing brush, grinding engines, now and then a voice

lifted in thick gutturals. "It must be an armored squad at least," said Regelin. "A compliment!"

"That kind of compliments I can modestly do without," I said.

At dawn the jets came, two of them whistling from the sky to blast us with rockets.

We stood on the porch, firing our disintegrators as they rushed down. One of them broke open in midair and smashed into the earth and skidded across the clearing into the woods. The other wobbled out of sight, trailing smoke. Our walls were gouged by the rockets but still held firm.

Temporarily, it was impasse. They couldn't get close enough to break down our defenses with low-powered explosives, heavy armor, or disintegrators—our own Sirian guns forbade that. And they didn't want to destroy us utterly. But sooner or later they were bound to find a way out of the dilemma: near-miss precision bombing from high up, for instance. Or they could simply starve us out.

"There's no two ways about it," I said at breakfast. "We're going to have to try a break-through." My head felt gritty from sleeplessness, it was hard to think. "If we could provoke them into an all-out rush, and then perhaps one or two of us slip away in the melee—"

"That requires darkness," said Regelin grayly. "Do we have until nightfall?"

Kit gave me a long and serious look. "The prisoners, too

Intelligence Prime scowled. A page had been torn from the book. Why?

It could be for some simple purpose. Maybe to wipe up blood, or light a fire, or —anything. But he didn't like a story with missing pieces.

David Arnfeld and Regelin dzu Coruthan were almost three weeks dead now, and Christine Hawthorne was a captive. She had blurted her answers with such hysterical readiness that there had seemed no reason to question her under drugs—always a tedious and time-consuming process. But perhaps it would be wise to do so after all.

Skimming ahead in the narrative. Intelligence Prime decided that the missing page probably related the killing of the two prisoners, Radeef and Naseer, as a precautionary measure, which Hawthorne had told about. Their bodies had never been found for certain; their ruined flesh was doubtless mingled with the shattered unidentifiable remnants found in the cabin after the last charge of the Tahowwa. Perhaps, thought Intelligence Prime, Arnfeld had not wanted to leave the account of an outright murder in his record.

out of the woods again, spilling Tahowwan forms from their armored doors. Our guns flamed, cutting them down, reaping them, but they moved fast. In seconds they were thundering at the front entrance.

Regelin's machine-gun stopped as he rolled away from a hurled grenade. It exploded viciously, showering the cabin with steel splinters. I crouched behind a table, sweeping them with the disintegrator beam as they came in the front door. Behind me, in the bedrooms, Kit raked their sappers trying to blow down our rear wall. The cabin shook.

THEN it was over. Suddenly it was over, they had retreated again. Our home was a wreck of tumbled, broken furniture, splashed and streaming with the fragments of living creatures. We had driven them back again, but now we must live with horror.

Regelin sat up, holding his left arm. I went over to him, shakily, and bandaged his wound. The arm would be out of action, but he could still handle a gun. He smiled in a tired way and lay down on the kitchen cot to sleep.

"They almost made it that time," I said to Kit. "I'm sorry I got you into this, darling."

"No, it was I who involved you—remember?" She made a forlorn attempt at laughter. Her dear face was smudged and streaked with dirt, and she could not halt the incessant small trembling within her.

"Well," I said, "it'll soon be over. I'm beginning to think we ought to give up. This is useless."

"No," she said. "We're finished anyway. Death now, or life in one of their jails, what's the difference? But I hope they let Alice go. Someone could adopt her."

"Sure," I said. "They'll let the kid go, to some orphanage I suppose. Alice will be all right."

"I wish—" Her voice was so low I could hardly hear it. "I wish you and I could have had children, Dave."

I held her close. The afternoon sun shone brilliantly in through the shattered door. Then we had to leave each other for our posts.

It was toward evening that another Tahowwa appeared, holding a flag of truce. Regelin and I went out to talk to him, Kit stayed within to guard the rear; but she heard the dialogue.

He squatted on the ground in front of the stoop, weird against the serenity of Earth's forest. "Your stubbornness is ill-advised," he said matter-of-factly. "There will be no one coming to help you."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Regelin.

"If you imply that you have scattered the truth wider than we thought—" It was a slow, tight murmur.

Regelin shrugged. "Think whatever you like," he said.

"Look," I said, "we'll make a bargain with you. Give us a jet and a head start, and—"

"Please, let us not waste words." The Tahowwa laughed. "You know, Arnfeld, we admire you and your friends. We do not hate you, in fact it would be pleasant if you were on our side. But necessity drives us to make a harsh ultimatum."

"Which is—?"

"We have had the child, Alice Hawthorne, brought here. We insist that you surrender to us. Otherwise the child will be killed."

I heard Kit's gasp somewhere behind me. My own head swam a little.

The Tahowwa gestured. Another of his kind stepped briefly out of the woods. He was carrying Alice. I could see that she was crying.

"How long—" I forced it out through a stiffened throat. "How long do we have to decide?"

"Until dawn tomorrow," he said, not unkindly.

He turned and walked off. All of them were hidden from sight. There were only the corpses, and the blood, and buzzing flies.

I went back into the cabin and took Kit in my arms and held her very close.

IT IS late as I write these final lines. Outside, there is the cool northern night, and the shimmer on the lake and the whisper of trees. A dim light glows for me, a flashlight laid on the table. I am in the south bedroom, Regelin at the front entrance, Kit sleeping in the kitchen, if she can sleep.

None of us can see the others, the great loneliness is already on us.

There is really no need to mount guard. I think the Tahowwa will keep their word. Why shouldn't they? Final victory is theirs. But habit keeps us watchful, our brains feel empty and there is only habit left.

We talked of it in broken sentences, after the Tahowwa had gone. Kit wept, dry shuddering sobs, and when I tried again to comfort her she drew away from me.

"What's the use?" she asked us, over and over again. "We're beaten. We've got to give up anyway."

Regelin shook his head. "Not alive," he answered.

"But Alice! They'll *kill* her. They'll take her out where we can see and cut her throat."

"I am sorry," he said. "But they have already murdered two worlds. We cannot let one child—"

"It's not as if there were any hope." Her voice was raw. "It's not as if any chance at all remained."

The iron of his breed closed down on him. I thought of the unbending Martian code—no, Regelin, raised in it from birth, could never give up while he lived. He shook his head again.

"They know Reggy and I survive," I said. "But they may not be sure about you, Kit, even now. If we two surrender, you could perhaps escape, sneak into the woods tonight—"

A flicker of her old temper burned at me: "How do I know you two won't break your word and fight on?"

"I'd never do that to you, Kit," I whispered.

"And they'd find out anyway," she cried. "They'd know that one of us was still loose, when they questioned you—"

"They would not kill Alice on that ac-

count," said Regelin. "They are not fiends, in spite of all they have done."

"I can't," she croaked. "I can't go and leave her."

Regelin looked at me. "Then one of us can," he said. "You are the logical one, David. You are uninjured, and also would be less conspicuous on Earth. You could perhaps reach this Torreos."

"It seems to be the only way," I answered dully.

"Dave—no!" Kit's protest was wild.

"Yes," I said, not meeting her eyes. "I'm sorry, but there's no choice."

She looked at me for a very long while. Then she turned and went away from us, into the kitchen, and closed the door behind her. I have not seen her since.

—It is now, I think, almost midnight. Regelin will soon make a rush into the woods, firing, drawing attention to himself, and while he is cut down I will try to slip past the besiegers. It is so thin a hope that it is no hope at all, but we must try. Kit can wait here and surrender to them when they come. I hope they will not harm Alice on my account, and that Kit will not think too harshly of me.

I want to finish this record and leave it here. I have loosened a floorboard and will slip the book underneath and fasten the board again. Perhaps it will be overlooked by the Tahowwa. Perhaps some man years hence will stumble across it. Perhaps—

The gods must be laughing now. But a man has to keep trying.

Epilogue

INTELLIGENCE PRIME laid the stained, tattered book aside. It was late. There was silence all around him.

He got up and glided to the window. The high tower of Mars' Earth Headquarters looked dizzily down onto the nighted reaches of Sao Paulo. Here and there a dim light glittered, and the land curved darkly away over the rim of the world. His own secret office was a very tiny thing, perched above immensity.

Yes, he thought, *we shall have to nab Torreos. I will give the orders tomorrow morning.*

He sighed. War was a cruel and senseless business. Sometimes he wished his fathers had not decided on it. But now the feet of the Tahowwa race were set on that road and there was no turning back. He could only guide his people as best he was able.

I would have liked to know Arnfeld and Regelin, he thought briefly. *As friends. I wonder what was in their minds, there at the end?*

For that matter, what had been in the mind of Christine Hawthorne? She had loved both of them. And yet she had taken a disintegrator and stolen out of the kitchen and destroyed them before they could leave her. Afterward she had run weeping and shrieking out to the Tahowwa, raising a clamor which drew them from all around to look at her with a creeping horror.

Well, there must have been horror enough in her own heart—must still be. There had been little left of her husband and her comrade: the shattered faces were just barely recognizable, the rest not pleasant to think about. But she had saved her child.

I imagine the kindest thing to do is to put the girl in an orphanage, and then kill the mother some night when she is asleep. I don't know. Maybe I should ask her.

Well—victory. The book had done little except confirm the woman's story. The fact of the Tahowwa's existence was thoroughly stamped out now, the hunt was over, it was time to resume work. First the Martians to reduce Earth, and then the plan for wrecking Martian industry, and then the open declaration, the Tahowwa riding in as overlords. Intelligence Prime reflected sardonically that the future would make him a great hero. How many other conquerors had felt his doubts and fears and guilt, alone with their own souls at night?

The soft chime brought him jerking to full awareness. He cursed his overstrained nerves. *"Mu-afeen chelbakeesh!"* Then, with a return of control: *"Houn."* Come in.

The door opened. He looked down the barrel of a gun.

Slowly he raised his eyes. The face behind the gun was human—gaunt, burning-eyed, unkempt hair and savagely twisted mouth. The heart of Intelligence Prime leaped against his ribs. He backed against the

farther wall, raising his hands before his breast.

"Where is she?" said David Arnfeld. "Where is my wife?"

Others were behind him, uniformed Martians and armed humans, a small force that peered into the office and then flowed quietly on down the corridors. Arnfeld took a closer step, jabbing his gun at the Tahowwa. "Where is Christine Hawthorne?"

"You'd better tell him," said Regelin dzu Coruthan. "He is not in a mood to play games."

"Cell—Cell 27," gasped Intelligence Prime out of nightmare. "She—the child—they have not been harmed."

"Come on," said Arnfeld curtly to a Martian staff officer. "You can guide me." They vanished down the hall.

Others entered. Yoakh Dzugeth ay Valkazan, undercommandant of Earth, who had always been considered safe, stalked over to the communicator. He began at once to call sections of the great building and give orders.

Intelligence Prime crouched in a corner, looking with blurred vision at Regelin. "How did you do it?" he whispered.

The Martian didn't answer immediately. One hand held a gun on the Tahowwa, the other, still bandaged, flipped through Arnfeld's book. "I see you found this," he said at last, idly. "Interesting souvenir. Hm—yes, it carries the story almost to the end. And, incidentally, it tells the truth. When David wrote those last lines, he was indeed desperate. So the book is true enough as far as it goes."

Dzugeth looked up with satisfaction. "I think we hold the entire building now," he said. "And the Commandant is on his way—I told him it was an emergency."

Mars' Supreme Commandant of Earth, Darheesh of the Tahowwa, on his way to an ambush! Intelligence Prime fought not to shriek.

"You, of course, will send messages for us to the continental HQ's," Regelin told him. "It should not take us many weeks to organize the overthrow of your rule on Earth and Luna, without any of your folk on Mars being aware of it. Then we can think about the next step."

"How did you do it?" The voice was dead.

"Oh, that!" Regelin chuckled. "A bit of complicated thinking. David told us his plan, in whispers, then he and I went back to our posts. Kit, who was hidden from either of us by the kitchen doors, opened the shed and talked to Radeef and—what was his name?—oh, yes, Naseer. She told them that she had to betray us, lest our recklessness bring the death of her child. She couldn't bring herself to shoot us, she said, but she released the aliens and gave them guns, warning them that we were alert and suspicious. Naturally, they assumed David's and my shapes and whatever appropriate clothes they had; then each of them went to his opposite number, my duplicate to David through the one bedroom, his to me through the kitchen door, so neither he nor I would suspect anything. However, we were prepared, you see. They were armed and ready to kill us, so when they came to us, we shot, with no special compunctions. The disintegrators left a mess!

"Kit went into her hysterical act, running out and screaming and drawing attention. David and I used the time to hide ourselves well in the dark shed. We waited while they came in and verified what she had told them; then, at the first chance, we slipped away.

"Being in possession of our 'bodies,' you, of course, called off the hunt, which made things fairly simple for us. David went to Duluth and hid, while I bluffed a ride to Sao Paulo on an official jet. Once here, I was soon in touch with Torreos and, through him, Dzugeth; we kidnapped an abscure Tahowwa officer for proof and interrogation, fetched David, and organized this mutiny."

Intelligence Prime, lord of the Solar System, raised his head, and his eyes pleaded for the life of his people.

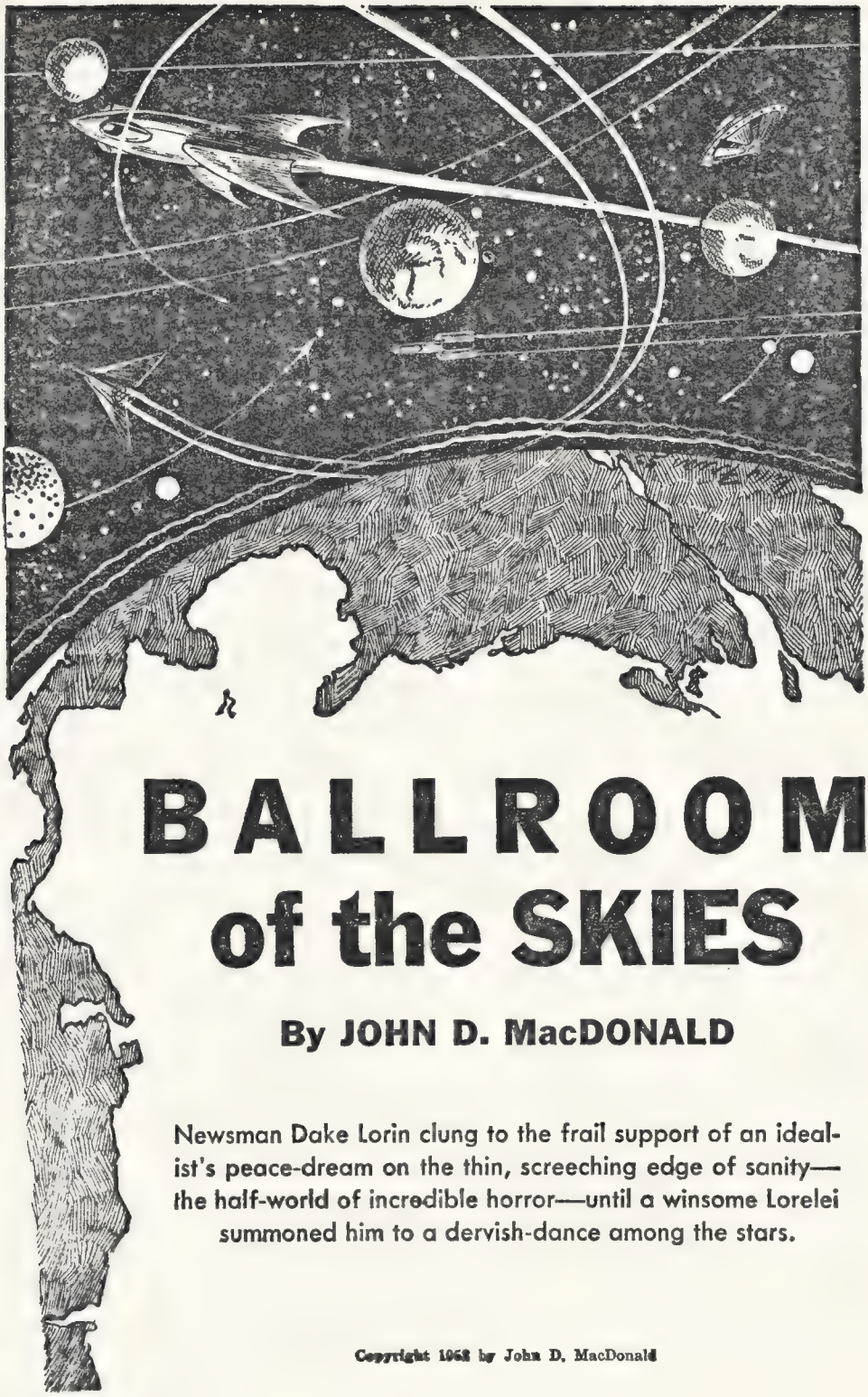
Alive today

...and a happy grandmother, because years ago she went to her doctor when she first noticed one of cancer's danger signals.

Do you know the seven common danger signals that *may* mean cancer: (1) any sore that does not heal (2) a lump or thickening, in the breast or elsewhere (3) unusual bleeding or discharge (4) any change in a wart or mole (5) persistent indigestion or difficulty in swallowing (6) persistent hoarseness or cough (7) any change in normal bowel habits.

To guard yourself and those you love, against cancer, call the nearest office of the American Cancer Society or address your inquiry to "Cancer" in care of your local Post Office.

American Cancer Society



BALLROOM of the SKIES

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

Newsman Dake Lorin clung to the frail support of an idealist's peace-dream on the thin, screeching edge of sanity—the half-world of incredible horror—until a winsome Lorelei summoned him to a dervish-dance among the stars.

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I

THE world, he thought, is like that circus act of long ago, back in the sweet-colored days of childhood, when the big top was as high as the sky, and gigantic horses marched the earth.

He remembered the act. The ragged clown teetering on the high wire, clutching his misshapen hat, reeling toward destruction, catching himself in that last throat-thickening instant to flounder some more. You believed in him then. That poor dazed clown, petrified by height, yet trying with pathetic and humble courage to please the crowd, taking from the baggy clothes the white dinner plates and, fighting his fear and his constant losses of balance, managing somehow to juggle the plates. Oh, how white they had shined in the spotlights!

You could see how the awkward body would plummet to the hard earth, and you wanted to stop looking, yet could not stop. And then suddenly his balance became sure and certain. He stripped off the baggy clothes to reveal himself, taut and muscular in the spangled tights, bowing to applause. You laughed aloud into Daddy's eyes, knowing how close you had been to tears.

Now all the men of the world watched the humble clown on the high wire. He juggled atomics, and napalm and all the hundred ways to separate the soul from the body, either quickly or very slowly. He wavered up there in the spotlights and all the eyes watched, knowing that when at last he fell, it would all be gone—the tent and the music and the elephant girls, forever and ever. He had stood up there too long. The nerves of men were ground thin and fine. You waited for him to strip off the baggy clown clothes and bow to the applause of the world. But he never did. He was caught up there, impaled for eternity on the bright shafts of the spotlights.

Once he had seen a revival of a Harold Lloyd picture. He had seen it when he was a child, and the picture, even then, had been thirty years old. The be-spectacled man had been blindfolded and he was walking about in the steel beams of a building under construction, a skyscraper, back in the days when buildings stretched upward toward the sun, rather than downward into the warm safe earth.

The comedian had not known he was a dizzy height in the air. He wandered about aimlessly, arms outstretched. When he stepped off into space a girder, being hoisted up from below, would always present itself just in time to take his weight. It had been one of those Saturday showings. He remembered how all the children had screamed at the tension of that old silent film.

Maybe that expressed a truer analogy, because the clown was aware of his danger, and the comedian walked in an absurd innocence.

That had been the time, in the early sixties, when you had been certain that the clown would fall, that the beam would not arrive in time. But they had pocked each others cities with the new ugliness, hurled the dwindling wealth of the planet at each other for a time. Ostensibly the democracies had won. The armies had hammered their way back and forth across Europe for the third and last time. Now, as had been predicted so many times before, Europe was wasteland, physically and spiritually incapable of rising again from her knees. Vassal states, with marginal resources, struggling for meager existence.

Somehow, insanely, the world had caught itself once more—saved itself on the very brink of destruction. The conflict-inspired artificial satellites had failed. One had crashed into the Pacific. The other had curiously abandoned its carefully calculated orbit to achieve an escape that took it, in a widening spiral, to smash against the moon. Of all the industrial economies left, only Pak-India, reunited, was capable of trying again. And India wasn't interested. The astonishing effect on her standard of living as a result of the ruthless years of compulsory sterilization had given her the vigor to absorb Burma, Siam, Ceylon, the Malay Peninsula, a rich slice of south China. Reclamation of jungle and desert gave her the most solid basis of raw materials in the world, with the exception, perhaps, of Brazil, which had but recently moved her seat of government to Buenos Aires.

It wasn't, Branson, thought, the sort of line-up that anyone could have guessed back

in the days before the war. Communism, both as a religion and as a political theory, had failed when its pie in the sky had failed to materialize. It had failed when it had run up against man's peculiarly basic desire to do as he damn pleased.

Each time the world tottered on the high wire, it recovered its balance in a weird and wonderful way. Now Pak-India was the king-pin democracy, with the United States trying to assure itself that it was a full partner, rather than, as was obvious to any objective person, a junior partner. Huddled together under India's skirts were all of the nations of Europe except Spain—all the nations, including those new nations which were the result of a partitioned Russia. Also, under the same skirt, was Australia, Canada.

But the clock had turned backward and the new enemy was the old enemy all over again. Fascism—a strong triple coalition of Brazil, which had taken over three quarters of the South American continent, marching and singing under the silver banners of Garva, and North China, singing the same songs, though with oriental dissonance, under a man called Stephen Chu, and Irania, which included Arabia, Egypt, most of North Africa, marching with burnoose and iron heels under the guidance of that renegade Anglo-Egyptian, George Fahdi.

The crazy years since the war had passed, and now all the strong new lines were drawn. Don't step over my line. Look at my armies, my bomber fleets, my missile stations. Don't step over my line.

The clown world fought for balance. The comedian stepped off into space.

BRANSON left his desk and walked over to the window. Rent cheaply and in fear, and you get a window to look out of. An expensive office would have a clever diorama where the window would be. The psychologists had become important to underground architecture. If a man must live and work underground, it must be made to look like above-ground, because man is not a mole.

In the bright noisy dusk of New Times Square, ten stories below, the crowds moved slowly. American cars wheezed and clattered through the street, their turbines laboring under the low-grade fuels. Here and there he could see a long glittering Taj or a Brahma, cars whose cost and upkeep were far beyond the purse of anyone who worked for wages. The Indians made the best automobiles in the world. Tata Automotive designed cars for looks and power, while what was left of Detroit had to concentrate on substitute materials, on fuel economy, on standardization of design from year to year. Some of the foreign cars, he knew, would be driven by tourists from Pak-India. It was rather difficult at times to stomach their arrogance, their conscious certainty that everything in India was better than here in the States. Far better. They had, somehow, become the brash new nation, the young giant born in ashes, rising to strength.

But, Branson knew, they had to be dealt with delicately. Their tourist rupees were sadly needed. And their embassies were powerful. Add how, if you didn't speak either Hindi or Tamil, they thought they could make you understand by yelling at you. Their President, Gondohl Lahl, had much of that same arrogance. The only product of America which India seemed to approve of whole-heartedly was the beauty of its long-legged girls.

Some of the weariness of the past year left Darwin Branson as he thought that it was barely conceivable that now, through his own efforts, the war-tide might be halted, the drums and bugles stilled. His mission had been a secret one, entrusted to him by that wise, farsighted President of the United States, Robert Enfield. From the practical point of view, it had merely been a piece of horsetrading. Enfield, and the other wise leaders, had known that the economy could not stand another war. India could get nowhere by demanding, and she refused to plead. The triple coalition would not deal with India directly on these matters. The United States became the sub rosa contact between them.

What Darwin Branson had seen in Buenos Aires, in Alexandria, in Shanghai, in Bombay, had convinced him, all over again, that the nature of man is good, rather than evil. There was fear all over the world. Now, at last, the era of the man of good will could be initiated.

It had been a hole and corner sort of affair. Meetings in furtive places, in cheap offices such as this one. Two more meetings and the deal could be made. A new mutual assistance pact for the world at large. Something, at last, with meaning. Something that would unwind the hard strands of fear and give mankind breathing space again, give him time to look around.

He looked at his watch. Another twenty minutes of thought, of solitude, and they would join him. Young Dake Lorin who had been his assistant, his husky right arm during the long year of cautious dickering. And that odd Englishman, Smith, who was empowered by his Leader, George Fahdi, to make a deal. Once all the offers were in, President Gondohl Lahl could be contacted. See what concessions the others will make? And this is all they want from you. The net result will be a bettering of the standard of living in every nation involved. And that will mean an easement of the tension. He had it on good authority that Gondohl Lahl would go along with it, and he knew that Smith would be cooperative.

He stood at the window, a smallish tired man with white hair and a furrowed face, eyes with a look of kindness. Midwife to peace. That was what Robert had called him.

Fifteen more minutes. He heard footsteps in the empty corridor. Thinking they had arrived earlier than planned, he went to the door and opened it. The young couple seemed unremarkable. They had better than average looks, and a rather disconcertingly assured way.

"I'm afraid you have the wrong office," Darwin Branson said politely.

"I'm afraid we have the right one, sir," the young man said, almost sadly. There was always the danger of assassination by fanatics. Yet this couple did not have that special look, unmistakable once seen.

Darwin Branson was still pondering that point when the young man killed him, so quickly, with such an astounding speed that there was no interval between life and death, no period wherein Darwin Branson was permitted to be aware that life had gone and the great darkness had begun.

The girl caught the body, carried it lightly and easily into the alcove. She stood, holding the body, her face expressionless, while her companion made quick preparations. The hand tool made a faint electronic whirr. She placed the body on the screen he had unfolded. She walked out of the alcove and stood, waiting. She heard the water running in the alcove sink. After a time the whirring stopped, and then the sound of water. Her companion came out, refolding the screen. He nodded and she went to the office door, opened it. Darwin Branson stood outside, his face as empty as death. She motioned to him. He walked in woodenly and took his seat behind the desk. The man leaned over and whispered one word into Darwin Branson's ear. He nodded to the girl and they went out of the office, closed the door.

"Thirty seconds," the girl said. The man knocked on the office door. Darwin Branson came to the door.

"I'm afraid you have the wrong office," Darwin Branson said politely.

The young man smiled. "Sorry, sir. I guess I have. Pardon me for bothering you."

"Perfectly all right," Branson said. The couple walked to the stairs. They went down five stairs and waited. They heard the elevator come up, stop. The door clanged open. Two men walked toward Branson's office.

The man nodded at the girl. She responded with a quick, almost shy smile. It was full night. He opened the stairwell window and they stepped easily out onto the narrow sill above the street. He closed the window behind them. They reappeared in the same instant on the high cornice of a building across the square. They looked down into the lighted office below, where three men were talking earnestly. Then the couple played a wild game, flickering like black flames from one high stone shoulder to the next, until at last he seemed to guess her intent and appeared at the same instant she did on the splintered stub of the Statue of Liberty in the harbor, touched her shoulder before she could escape. They laughed silently. It had been like the crazy game of a child who has finished a hard lesson. They clasped hands and were gone.

Back in the office Darwin Branson talked

to Smith. He instinctively did not like the man, did not trust him. Smith had . . . an oily look, a slippery look. Perhaps it would not be wise to trust him with the whole picture. He looked as though he could twist it this way and that, turn it inside out and find there some advantage for himself.

Dake Lorin sat, apparently taken in by Smith. Darwin Branson felt a bit contemptuous toward Dake Lorin. That young man was so . . . excessively noble. So naive and gullible. Dake would have you believe that the world could become a Garden of Eden once again. Sitting there, the whole preposterous six feet six inches of him, with that harsh black hair, and the dumb shelf of brow over the shadowed eyes, giving his face an oddly simian look. As though Dake were some great sad ape trying mournfully to rectify the errors of mankind. Dake was just the sort to be taken in by this oily Smith.

As Darwin Branson talked he wondered why he had wasted the past year on this chase of the wild goose. A few compromises would make no difference. The world was war bound, and Robert Enfield should stop kidding himself, stop thinking that the United States could step in with sub rosa mediation and stave off disaster. The crucial point, rather, was to select the winning side while there was still time to make a selection.

He saw that Smith was aware of his contempt, and he was amused.

II

SMITH had been awkwardly skeptical. He was a moon-faced man with nailhead eyes, fat babyish hands. Dake Lorin had exerted himself to be charming, to make a friend of this Smith. It had been most difficult. He kept thinking that Smith was a sort of complicated mechanical doll. And if you tripped the wrong reflex, you would be inundated by the standard line. Irania is strong. Irania is quick. Irania is brave. Our leader, George Fahdi, is farsighted.

Smith was in the country on a forged passport, arranged with the oblique assistance of one of the Under Secretaries of State. Dake had picked him up in Boston to drive him down to the conference with Darwin Branson.

The trick was to get under the automatic pseudo-patriotic reflex, and get down to the man himself.

Dake drove the small nondescript car at a sedate sixty-five, slowing for the stretches of neglected shattered slabs. The car, like most of the works of man, was a shade too small for Dake Lorin. His knees and elbows seemed always to be in the way.

"I understand your Leader was impressed with Mr. Branson."

Smith shrugged. "He told me later that he felt Mr. Branson was a great rarity. A good man. There are not many good men."

"I've worked with Mr. Branson for a year."

Smith turned in the seat. "So? You are . . . by trade, a government employee?"

"Not by trade. By trade I guess I'm a newspaperman. I was filling in in the Washington Bureau a couple of years ago. I interviewed Branson. He . . . stuck with me. The guy has quite an effect."

"You intrigue me," Smith said in his toneless voice.

Dake made a small decision. In order to disarm this Smith he would have to do a bit of a strip tease, let his soul show a bit. "I've always been a lone wolf type, Mr. Smith. Maybe a bit of a visionary. That state of mind always has a cause, I suppose. When I was twelve, a wide-eyed kid, the police picked up my Dad. He was a small-time politician. And a thief. He would have been safe all his life, but there was a change of administration and they threw him to the wolves. It was a deal. He was supposed to get eighteen months. But the judge crossed them up and Dad got ten years. When he found out that his old pal, the Governor, wasn't going to pardon him, he hung himself in his cell. My mother pulled herself together and we got along, somehow. I had a lot of schoolyard scraps. It made a mark on me, I guess. I grew up with a chip on my shoulder, and a big fat desire to change the world so that things like that couldn't happen."

"Quite a dream to have."

"I suppose so. Anyway, it gave me a drive. I learned the hard way that I couldn't change the world by punching it firmly in

the jaw. So I decided to instruct the world. I became a two-bit messiah in the newspaper game. But that's like knocking down stone walls with your head. What you tell them on Tuesday they can't remember on Wednesday. Well, I interviewed Darwin Branson and later it seemed like he'd been interviewing me. For the first time I'd found a man I could talk to. A man who believed . . . just as I believe . . . in the innate decency of mankind. I talked my fool head off. And went back, unofficially, to talk some more. Then, when I heard he was going to retire, I felt lost. As though the one sane man left in the world had given up. He got hold of me and put his new assignment on the line. I got out of newspaper work right then. And we've been working on it for a year."

"And it's still a dream, Mr. Lorin?"

"I'll have to let Mr. Branson tell you about that."

"It has been my experience, Mr. Lorin, that visionary tactics do not fit the world of practical international politics."

"Look at it this way, Mr. Smith. We've been carrying a double load of fear since Hiroshima. Every one of us. It has an effect on every joint human action, from marriage to treaties. Each power group has established 'talking points.' Thus, every one has demands to make, demands that will apparently not be met."

"We demand that Pak-India cease acts of aggression on their northwest frontier."

"Precisely. And it seems that all the demands balance out. In other words, if, through one vast treaty agreement, all the 'talking points' could be eliminated, it would give us the breathing space we need and . . . it might lead to the habit of similar world treaties in the future, once a new set of demands and 'talking points' have been set up. The result may be visionary. The method is practical, Mr. Smith."

"We will not make concessions," Smith said firmly.

"Stop talking like your Leader, Mr. Smith. Forgive my bluntness. Talk as a man. A living, thinking organism. You have ambitions. Otherwise you would not have reached such a high place under George Fahdi. Being in a high place, you sense the precariousness of your position. What would you give to be able to look ten years into the future and see yourself still important, still trusted, still . . . safe?"

"Life is not that certain."

"Yet we all want it to be that certain. We want to know that we will be free to live, and love, and be happy. Yet, as nations, we act in such a way that it increases rather than reduces our uncertainty. As though we were under some compulsion. Like lemmings, racing to the sea to drown themselves. Mr. Branson does not believe that it is necessary that, through our acts as nations, we must live in fear. He believes that, acting as nations, acting in good will, we can make this world as good a place to live as it was during the first fourteen years of this century. Your Leader is a man, just as you are. As I am. He does not need aggression to consolidate his position. He needs a constantly increasing standard of living to make his place secure. Proper treaties, proper utilization of world resources, can make that possible."

"You sound like a free trader from the history books."

"Perhaps. I am not as convincing as Mr. Branson."

"War, Mr. Lorin, is a cyclical phenomenon."

"That's been our traditional excuse. It's a cycle. Who can stop cycles? It's sunspots. Who can change the sun? Mr. Branson calls that statistical rationalization."

"Your Mr. Branson sounds like an impressive man."

"He is. Believe me, he is."

DAKE parked the car in a garage near New Times Square and they walked through the last faint grayness of dusk toward the rented office. Dake was dismally aware that if Smith wished to apply the trite fascisitic tag of decadent democracy, New Times Square gave him overpowering opportunity.

"In here, Mr. Smith," Dake said, glad to get the man off the street.

They rode up in the groaning elevator, and walked down the hall to the office. Darwin Branson got up quickly from behind his desk. Dake felt a warm assurance at seeing the man, felt an end to his own doubts.

The conference began. Dake was so ac-

customed to hearing the gentle assurance with which Branson wheedled, that he listened with half an ear. He suddenly focused his full, shocked attention on Darwin Branson when he heard him say, a bit coldly, "Naturally, if all the arrangements please your Leader, President Enfield wishes your Leader to . . . ah . . . remember us with friendliness."

Dake said, "Darwin! That implies that we're . . ."

"Please!" Branson said with soft authority.

Dake became reluctantly silent, telling himself that Branson had some good motive for handling this interview on a different tone and level than all the others.

Smith smiled. "I was afraid, after listening to your young friend, Mr. Branson, that I would find myself dealing with a saint. I am glad to detect a . . . shall we say . . . practical approach."

"This country, Mr. Smith, can't afford *not* to make friends, particularly with a coalition as powerful as yours."

"Could I safely say then, that those concessions we make shall be more . . . ah . . . spectacular than effective?"

Dake had never seen quite that smile on Darwin Branson's face before. "Please, Mr. Smith. You must remember that we are gentlemen of sincerity and integrity. Think how President Gondloh Lahl would be annoyed should he begin to think that whereas his concessions were made honestly, yours were made with a view to appearances."

Smith nodded. "I see what you mean. We must, above all else, be sincere. Now I am wondering if . . . your other dealings, with Garva and with Chu, have been made with this same degree of sincerity. I think that is a fair question."

"Of course, Mr. Smith. I will say this. They are all hoping that it is not . . . too good to be true."

"I believe," said Smith, "that I shall offer an alternate concession to the one you ask for. I believe we shall surrender Gibralter to Spain."

"Eyewash," Dake said hotly. "That means nothing. You can have missile stations zeroed in on it to immunize it any instant you feel like it."

Smith looked at Branson and raised one eyebrow. Branson said, "Don't underestimate his offer, Dake."

"But it's so obvious. You've said a hundred times, Darwin, that each concession has to be real and honest, or the whole thing will fall down. When everyone else sees that Irania is just making a . . . pointless gesture instead of a real concession, they'll withdraw their promises and we'll be back where we were."

"Your young man seems to be filled with a rather childish faith, Mr. Branson."

"An attribute of most young men, I'm afraid. I'll relay your offer to the others, Mr. Smith."

"And spoil a year's work, Darwin," Dake said dully. "I . . . just don't understand."

Branson stood up. "Can we assist you further, Mr. Smith?"

"No, thank you. Arrangements have been made for me. I'll be in Alexandria in the morning. And, I assure you, the Leader will not forget your . . . cooperation."

Smith bowed to Branson and then, mockingly to Dake Lorin. He left quietly.

The moment the door shut Dake said, "You've blown it, Darwin. You've blown it sky high."

Branson leaned back. He looked weary, but satisfied. "I think I've handled it in the only possible way, Dake. It has become increasingly obvious to me that we couldn't ever bring them all together."

"But yesterday you said . . ."

"Things have happened between yesterday and now. Things I can't explain to you. We've had to lower our sights, Dake. That Smith is an oily specimen, isn't he? But he's the representative of Irania. Oil reserves, Dake. A tremendous backlog of manpower. And influence gradually extending down into Africa, down into vast resources. They'll make good friends, Dake. Good friends to have."

"Now slow up just a minute. That is precisely the type of thinking, Darwin, that we have both openly said we detested. Opportunistic, blind thinking. Lining up with the outfit which seems to have the biggest muscles. Damn it all, this is an about face which I can't comprehend."

"When one plan looks as though it would fail, you pick the next best. That's an evidence of mature thinking, Dake."

"Nuts, my friend. It's an evidence of a desire to commit suicide. You, of all the people in the world, to suddenly turn out to be . . ."

"Watch it, Dake!"

"I won't watch it. I gave a year of my life to this, and now I find that all along you've been giving me the big one-world yak, and the brotherhood of man yak, while without letting me know you've been setting us up for a power deal."

"A power deal, my young friend, is the best that an indigent nation can hope for. We have to line up with the people who can hit the quickest and the hardest. I . . . think we've managed it. And very smoothly at that."

"You've managed it. Leave me out of it. I'm through, Darwin. You've tried your best to drag me into it, to assume that somehow—merely through being here with you I become some kind of . . . partner. It was more than a dream!"

"Remember how the British survived for so long, Dake, after they'd lost their muscles? Always creating that delicate balance of power and . . ."

"Ending in hell, Darwin, when the Indians threw them out of Fiji, when all the throats in the Solomons were cut. I can't seem to get through to you. We weren't doing this for us. We were doing it for the world at large, Darwin."

"Sometimes it is wise to accept half a loaf."

Dake Lorin felt the tingling tension in all his muscles, felt the uprush of the black crazy anger that was his greatest curse. The blindness, came, and he was unaware of his movements, unaware of time—aware only that he had somehow reached across the desk to grab the front of Branson's neat dark suit in one huge fist, had lifted the smaller man up out of the chair. He shook him until the face was blurred in his vision.

"Dake!" the man yelled. "Dake!"

The anger slowly receded. He dropped Branson back into the chair. He felt weak and he was sweating.

"Sorry," he said.

"You're a madman, Lorin!"

"You're a cheap little man, Branson. I have a hunch. I have the feeling there are more people than you think who will understand exactly how you sold out the human race on this deal. And I'm going to put the case before them. All of it. Every part of it. Then let the world judge you, Branson."

"Now just a moment. This involves a question of security, Lorin. I can have you classified as potentially subversive, have you sent to labor camp until you cool off. You know that."

"I don't think you can stop me."

"You've been engaged in secret negotiations. Any violation of security will be evidence of your disloyalty."

Dake said softly, "And you're the man who called those regulations, called the labor camps, the new barbarism, government by aboriginal decree. You changed overnight, Darwin. You're not the same man. I'll do what I can, and you can kindly go to hell."

"While you're doing it, examine your own motives again, Dake. Maybe you've spent your life looking for martyrdom, and this is your best opportunity."

"That's a low blow."

"You're upset, Dake. In a way I don't blame you. Disappointment is hard to take. But you are my friend. I don't want to see you hurt."

Dake stared at him for long seconds. There was nothing else to say. He turned on his heel and left the office, slamming the door violently behind him, taking a wry pleasure in the childishness of the gesture.

III

IN the stately cathedral hush of the austere Times-Tribune offices the following morning. Dake Lorin was slowly and uneasily passed up the ladder from managing editor to assistant publisher, to publisher.

"He will see you now, Mr. Lorin," a slat-thin female lisped.

Dake went into the inner office. The window dioramas were of wooded hills, blue mountain lakes. The publisher was a small round man with matronly shoulders and a dimpled chin.

"Sit down, Mr. Lorin," he said. He held a card between thumb and forefinger, as though it were something a shade nasty.

"I refreshed my mind, Mr. Lorin. The morgue typed me a summary. Your name, of course, was familiar to me the moment I heard it. Let me see now. Combat correspondent. Wounded. Married while on leave in '63. Wife killed by bombing of Buffalo when the suicide task force was repulsed. Returned to job as reporter on Philadelphia Bulletin. Did a good job of covering convention in '65 and became a political columnist. Syndicated in sixty-two papers at peak. Quite a bit of influence. Frequently under fire as a 'visionary', a dreamer. Columns collected into two books, reasonably successful. Advocated Second U.N., until India withdrew and it collapsed. Took an abrupt leave of absence a year ago. Activities during the past year unknown. Suspected to hold some ex-officio position in current administration, State Department side."

"Age 32, twenty-nine teeth, scimitar-shaped scar on left buttock. Very undignified wound, you know."

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Has anyone passed on my reason for seeing you?"

"Mr. Lorin, I am terribly afraid that the . . . ah . . . philosophy behind your political theorizing of the past would not be in accord with our . . ."

"I don't want a job. I have one exclusive I want to give you. I want to write it and I want the best and biggest splash you can give it. I came here because you have world readership."

"An exclusive? Our people dig, Mr. Lorin. We insist on that. I seriously doubt whether there could be any new development in . . . ah . . . your field which has not already been . . ."

Dake interrupted bluntly, hitching his chair closer, lowering his voice. "How about this sort of an exclusive, Mr. Haggins? Darwin Branson did not retire. He was given a very delicate mission by President Enfield. I worked on it with him for a year. The idea was to act as a middleman, to ease off world tension by getting all sides to do a little horsetrading. It was to be done in secrecy, and in the strictest honesty. All sides but Irania have agreed to make honest concessions. Irania was the last one. If Branson had dealt with Irania firmly and honestly, we could have had a chance to see at least five years of peace ahead of us. But I was present when Branson blew the whole scheme sky high by trying to make a second level deal with the Iranian representative. Irania will make a token concession, of no value. Then the others will water down their concessions, and the net result will be an intensification of world tension rather than an easement. I doubt whether your . . . diggers have uncovered that, Mr. Haggins. I want you to make a big splash so that the world can know how close it came to temporary nirvana. It might do some good. It might be like a nice clean wind blowing through some very dusty parliamentary sessions. Your sheet is influential. I feel that your cooperation is in the public service."

Haggins looked flustered. He got up and walked to the nearest diorama as though he were staring out a window. He had a curious habit of walking on his toes. He clasped his hands behind him, wriggling his thumbs.

"You . . . ah . . . hand us a very hot potato, Mr. Lorin."

"Any good story is likely to be, isn't it?"

"As you know, in exposing corruption, venality, we are absolutely fearless."

"So I've heard," Dake said dryly.

"However, there is one consideration here which we must examine . . . ah . . . rather closely."

"And that is?"

"The possibility that our motives might be misinterpreted, Mr. Lorin. You have stated that this was all . . . secret negotiation. I refer now, of course, to the Public Disservice Act of '65. It would not give us recourse to any court of law, or any chance to state our own case. The Board might arbitrarily consider our publication of your story a Disservice to the State. You know the answer to that. Confiscatory fines."

"I feel that it is worth the risk."

Haggins turned toward him. "Risk is in direct ratio to what you have to lose, is it not?"

"That Act itself is the result of fear. If there were less fear in the world, Mr. Haggins, that Act might be repealed."

Haggins came back to the desk. Dake could see that he had reached a decision. He was more at ease. He said, "A bit visionary, Mr. Lorin?" He smiled. "We do our best, Mr. Lorin. We feel that we improve the

world, improve our environment, in many modest, but effective ways. Now you would have us take something that I can only consider as a vast gamble. If we should win, the gain is rather questionable. Should we lose, the loss is definite. By losing we would forfeit our chance to continue to do good in our own way."

"In other words, it's a lack of courage, Mr. Haggins?"

Haggins flushed, stood up, his hand outstretched. "Good luck to you, sir. I trust you will find a publisher who will be a bit more . . . rash, shall we say." He coughed. "And naturally, I will not mention this to anyone. I would not care to be accused of a personal Disservice. I am a bit too old to work on the oil shale."

Dake looked at the pink, neatly-manicured hand. After a few moments Haggins withdrew it, rubbed it nervously on the side of his trousers. Dake nodded abruptly and left the office, took the elevator up the reinforced concrete shaft to ground level.

He ate soybean steak in a small dismal restaurant and continued his search. At the Union Record and at the News-Mirror the brush-off was less delicate, but just as effective.

At dusk he managed an interview in a rattletrap building in Jersey City, an interview with a vast brick-red Irishman with a whiskey rasp and a smell of barbershop.

The Irishman interrupted him. "Fleng the theories, Lorin. All that prono soup is over my head. You want to reach people. I've got a circulation. So let's get down to it. How about the stash, the dinero, the rupes, the happy old dollars?"

"How do you mean?"

"I'm used to fighting. Hell, I've got the most pornographic set of comic strips this side of Capetown. They're always trying to shut me down. I got a half million press run. So I do this. I put a banner head. Paid Advertising, it says. Not the opinion of the publisher, it says. I give you inside page one, and you write it and sign it. Thirty thousand rupees it costs you. Sixty thousand bucks. Lay it on the line and you can use that page for any damn thing you want. That's the deal, and take it or leave it."

"How much down?"

"The whole thing down. They'll confiscate anything you got before they ship you out. I can't take chances."

"It's a lot of money, Kelly."

"You look like a guy with a lot of money."

"I'll have to . . . check with some friends. I'll make a decision and come in tomorrow and tell you."

"If the answer is no, don't bother to come in. I won't dicker. That's the price. It stands. What are you doing tonight? I got a couple cute little Singhalese tourists lined up, and four Oakleys to a new private tridi way uptown."

"No, thanks. See you tomorrow."

"Not too early. I expect to have a hangover."

DAKE went back to the city and bought passage to Philadelphia on one of the feeder lines maintained by Calcutta International Jetways. CIJ used all Indian personnel for their major schedules, but hired U.S. personnel for the feeder lines, entrusting to them the creaking, outmoded aircraft. One U.S.-owned airlines had linked the entire world. But, in the exhaustion following the war, with the regimentation and labor allocations that had cut travel so severely, the airlines, starved for freight and passengers, had slid inevitably toward bankruptcy, in spite of the subsidies of an impoverished federal government. Thus, when CIJ had made a reasonable offer for all lines and franchises, the airlines had taken it gladly, the investors receiving CIJ stock in return for their holdings. CIJ service was quick, impersonal, efficient. There were only two other passengers on the sixty seat aircraft. Dake knew that CIJ took a continual loss on the New York-Philadelphia run, but maintained the frequent schedule for the convenience of the Indian nationals who supervised their investments in both cities. He leaned back in the seat for the short run. The spattered lights of the city wheeled under one wing.

He could never quite become accustomed to being considered by the Pak-Indians a second-class citizen. Toynbee had coldly outlined the ecology of civilizations. The great wheel had turned slowly, and the East was once again the new fountainhead of vitality. Their discrimination was subtle, but im-

placable. In major cities Indian clubs had been established. Americans could be taken there as guests, but were forbidden membership. There had been a fad when American women had begun to wear saris, to make imitation caste marks on their foreheads. The Pak-Indian Ambassador had called on the President. Saris disappeared from the shops. Fashion magazines hinted that caste marks were crude, even rude. Everyone was happy again.

Indians would treat you with courtesy, even with affability, but in any conversation with them you could detect, running like a symphonic theme through the orchestration of words, their conviction that you were a citizen of a decadent nation, one that had gone beyond its peak of influence in world affairs, one that was doomed to the inevitable status of a supplicant nation, free in name only.

We had it, he thought, and we threw it away. We ripped our iron and coal and oil out of the warm earth, used our copper and our forests and the rich topsoil, and hurled it all at our enemies, and conquered them, and were left at last with the empty ravaged land. How could it have been avoided? What could we have done that we did not do? Should we have used that great moment of momentum in 1945, well over twenty years ago and gone on to take over the planet? Should we have dropped the sword, misered our resources, and succumbed meekly during the increasing pressure of the middle fifties? How did it come about that any step we could take was wrong, that every course open to us was but a different road to a different classification of disaster? England had been dying too—just a few scant years ahead of us in the inexorable schedule, yet we had been unable to learn from her defeats, unable to cut a new channel. It was almost, he thought, as though there was some unanswerable paradox against which every world power must inevitably run up and collapse. Some cold and alien influence in the world, breaking the hearts of men.

Or perhaps, it is all merely our own stupidity. Our blindness. Our inability to see and comprehend the obvious. Perhaps we are all like Darwin Branson. Able for a time—even for a sustained length of time—to influence our environment for good, yet always failing somehow in that last crucial moment. As Branson had failed when the blindness came over him.

He wondered what Patrice would say. He dreaded seeing her. Her love was a contradiction. She seemed capable of loving every aspect of him as a human being except his final, innermost motivation.

Unscathed Philadelphia had its standard joke about itself. When, during the war, many of the executive branches of government had to be evacuated to Philadelphia, and when the city itself was not bombed, the Philadelphians proclaimed that the enemy had been smart enough to realize that by obliterating all the red tape, they could be helping the U. S. instead of hurting it. The air of immunity had carried over into the present time of fear. There was less underground construction here than elsewhere. It was a prim, old-lady city, walking through the mud with its skirts carefully held up, not too daringly, and with a wise and knowing air as though that old lady, in her almost forgotten youth, had raised a bit of forbidden hell.

DECELERATION thrust him forward against the straps, and ten minutes later he was in a wheezing, clattering taxi headed toward Patrice's unexpectedly modest home near Upper Darby. Patrice's father had died in '61, just one week and two days before the passage of the hundred percent inheritance tax bill. His fortune had its beginnings back when the original Gundar Togelson had been pirating oil land from Mellon. Each Togelson since then had increased it until the late fifties when the capital gains tax was revised to take seventy percent of all capital gains. After inheritance taxes, Patrice, in addition to maximum gifts each year her father was alive, inherited about five and a half millions. At the present time it was nearly the last fortune left relatively intact, inside the country. Under the impact of the Truman taxes many people had managed to emigrate with their funds to economically sunnier lands, just as the Socialist Government in England had driven many private fortunes to Bermuda and elsewhere.

Patrice Togelson, a tall, warmly-built Viking girl had brought to Dake a deep, earthy,

physical warmth. Yet he knew that in the management of her money she was like flint, and like quicksilver. Like flint in her calculating hardness. Like quicksilver in her ability to detect the tiniest loopholes, slide through them. They had met after he had taken a casual swipe at her in his column, criticizing her for buying into an Indian land deal to take advantage of the tax concessions Washington had given the investment of Indian capital.

Patrice had appeared in his office at the Bulletin the next morning, blue eyes like ice, jaw set, hair a bright soft flow of autumn barley. She had leaned both fists on his desk, high breasts lifting with the deep breathing of controlled anger.

"You, my friend, are out of your depth this time," she said.

"And you, young lady, are an anachronism. You are a female pirate. You are a very slick conniver."

"You cost me more money yesterday than you'll make in your whole life."

"Then the very least I can do is buy your lunch."

They glared at each other, grinned suddenly, laughed aloud and went out together. It had been at first a good friendship, even though their personal philosophies were poles apart. For two such basically aloof people, it had been a warmth of friendship that had quite astonished them. They found they laughed more often when they were together. One night, in front of the November fireplace in her small home, he had kissed her, expecting it to be casual, finding it to be shockingly fierce.

They were friends, and they became lovers without losing all of friendship. She was almost six feet tall, yet built in perfect feminine scale. They laughed about being in a world built too small for them.

The inevitable blowup came when he told her why he was taking a "leave of absence." It had been a highly unpleasant scene. Even while they fought, neither of them retreating a step, he knew that she too was aware of the loneliness to come.

The taxi driver examined the tip, grunting something that could have been thanks, and clattered off. Dake went up the walk, knowing that no fortress was ever as well protected as this house, this small tidy house, knowing that by breaking the infrared beams he had become target. He stood on the porch, waiting. The door was suddenly opened by the pretty Japanese maid, who gave him a gold-toothed smile and said, as though he had visited there yesterday, "Good evening, Mr. Lorin."

"Evening. Does . . ."

"She knows you are here, sir. She will be right down. A brandy, sir? I'll bring it to you in the study."

He was amused. The study was for business transactions. The lounge-living room was for friends. He wondered if Patrice were prescient. Simpler than that, perhaps. She knew him well. She knew his inflexibility. And so she would know that this was not a personal call. He sat in one of the deep leather chairs.

The maid brought the brandy, an ancient bottle and two bell glasses on a black tray. She put them on the small table beside his chair, and left without a sound.

When he heard Patrice's distinctive stride he got up quickly, smiled at her as she came into the study. Her smile was warmer than he expected. As always, she had that remembered look of being larger than life size, more vital. She wore dark red, tailored slacks, a matching halter.

"Quite a tan, Patrice," he said.

"I got back from Acapulco yesterday."

"Pleasure trip?" he asked wryly, her hands warm and firm in his.

She made a face. "A good buy. Hotel property."

"With your Indian pals?"

"Uh uh. Some Brazilian pals this time."

"Both ends against the middle, Patrice?"

"Of course. How else does a girl get along?" She inspected him, her head tilted to one side. "You look gaunter, darling. Hollow-eyed. I bet your ribs show."

"The strain of being a do-gooder."

"Aren't we being just a little bit too nasty nice to each other?" She held her hand up, thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "Just that much brandy, please. Would I look too severe if I sat at the desk?"

"Not if it's where your checkbook is."

She bit her lip. "This could be interesting, couldn't it?" She seated herself behind the desk. He took her the brandy, went back to the deep chair.

SHE sipped, watching him over the rim. She set the glass down and said, "I have a feeling we're going to spar, and it might be nasty, and before we spoil each other's dispositions, I want to say something. I've had a year to plan just exactly how I should say it. Just this, Dake. I've missed you. Quite horribly. I wanted, and tried, to buy you and put you in stock. It didn't work. I've been going around rationalizing it, telling myself that if you *could* be purchased, I wouldn't want you. But I'm not that way. I wish you *could* be. I wish you had sense enough to be. Life has plenty of meaning without you. It had a shade more when you were around. I miss that little increment. I'm a selfish, hard-fisted, dominating woman, and if there's any way I can acquire you permanently, I'm going to do it."

"Okay, Patrice. Equal candor. I've missed you. I've wished that either you or I could bend a little without breaking. But I know that's like wishing for the moon. We were fine until we got into a scrap about pretty basic things. Things like selfishness, like human dignity."

"My world, Dake, is a pig pen. The smartest greediest pig gets the most corn."

"My world is a place where there's hope."

"But we both seem to be living in my world, don't we? Now tell me why you look haunted and . . . sick at heart, Dake."

He told her. She had the knack of listening with an absolute stillness, of applying her intense awareness to the problem at hand. He told her all of it, up to and including Kelly.

"And so you came to me."

"Asking for sixty thousand dollars. Maybe you can write it off as a charity."

"I don't believe in what you're trying to do."

"I don't expect you to. I'm begging."

"For old time's sake. Isn't that the tritest phrase in the world?" She opened a drawer, selected a checkbook, scrawled a check, tore it out. She sat, her chin balanced on her fist, waving the check slowly back and forth.

"I don't make gifts, Dake. I make deals."

"I had a hunch it wasn't going to be that simple."

"You can have this check. Once that stuff hits the streets, you're going to think a building fell on you. It is going to cost me half as much again to argue the Board into letting you run around loose. Then I'll give you thirty days to wait for the impact of what you write. If nothing happens, and I am certain nothing will, you will be the one to bend a little. You will try to accept the world on its own terms. And accept me along with it, Dake."

"Then it is a purchase, after all?"

"How much pride do you leave a lady?"

"How much pride do you leave me?" he asked harshly. "Okay. Accept the fact that I'm a monomaniac. If what I want to do fails, I'll try something else."

"Little boy with a tin bugle, waking up all the forces of decency in the world. Look people. The cow's in the meadow, the sheep's in the corn."

"I don't know how to say this. A man does . . . what he has to do."

"And if it's an obsession? If it's something with its roots imbedded in a childhood catastrophe? Should he continue to destroy himself? Or try to effect a cure?"

"That's almost what Branson said to me."

"You told me very emphatically that he was a god walking the earth. It looks as if he remained a god to you until he questioned your . . . sanity. And then he became a monster. Personally I like his angle of snuggling up to Irania. India has been moving too fast. It balances things off a bit."

"And gives us a heightened tension, a bigger load of fear."

"Gives mankind as a whole more fear. I'm an individual. I take my own pride in being able to take care of myself."

"Anarchy?"

"Why not? That is, if you are faster and have bigger teeth than your neighbor?"

"We can't talk at all. We never could. We never will."

Her face softened. "Oh, Dake. We *did* talk. Lots."

He sighed. "I know. Sometimes it seems as if we're . . . such a damn miserable waste of each other."

She put the check on the corner of the desk within his reach. "It's on a rupee account in a branch of the Bank of India. Need it certified?"

"No. I can cash it. No deal then? No bargain?"

She looked down at her folded hands. A strand of the soft hair swung forward, shining gold in the lamplight. "No deal, Dake. I guess it's for . . . old time's sake."

He put the check in his wallet. "Thanks, Patrice I thought you'd be . . . a lot tougher."

She lifted her head. "I was going to be."

"Anyway, I appreciate it."

She stood up quickly, came to him, sat on the arm of the deep leather chair, leaned against him, her arm around his shoulders.

Her smile was crooked, and looked as though it hurt a bit. "I'm like your Darwin Branson," she whispered.

He looked up at her. "What do you mean?" She turned away, oddly shy.

"I'm practical. I, too, am willing to settle for . . . half a loaf."

He took her shoulders, turned her, pulled her back into his lap. Her hair had a clean spicy scent. Her lips were on holiday, from the long year apart. She kissed him with her eyes wide, blue, and terribly near in the lamplight.

IV

KELLY licked his thumb again, winked at Dake, and continued to count. "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Thirty thousand happy rupees. The page is yours. Got it with you?"

"I want to borrow an office and a typewriter, Kelly. I'll work the rest of the day and have it for you sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"It will be in Thursday's edition, then."

"I want a proof drawn on it, and a chance to check it before you lock it up."

"At the moment you are my favorite man in all the world. Anything you say."

"And I want a receipt, Kelly."

The man scrubbed his red chin with a big knuckle. "My boy you bring up a fascinating point. Indeed you do. Now we're both men of the world. How would it be if I give you a receipt for fifteen thousand? It would ease my tax picture considerable."

"Thirty thousand."

"Let's split the difference. I'll give you back . . . say, two thousand, and a receipt for twenty. We both gain that way."

"Suit yourself," Dake said wearily. "Just show me where I can work."

"I knew you were a sensible man when I laid eyes on you. Let me see. I can't give you Carter's place. The murals would keep your mind off your work. Come on. I know where I can put you."

The office was small, and it hadn't been dusted in a long time. The typewriter looked adequate. Dake tried it, using his gunfire four-finger technique. Kelly walked out, whistling. Dake shucked his coat, tossed it on the couch. He poked his hat back onto the back of his head, laid his cigarettes beside the machine, and pondered a lead. He tried a few and tore them up. Finally he found one he was satisfied with:

"This week humanity muffed the ball again. It was an infield error. The shadows stretch long across the diamond. The long game is drawing to a close. Death is on the mound. He threw one that President Enfield got a piece of. Enfield's hit put Darwin on third. He had a chance to come home. He ran nicely most of the way to the plate, and then faltered. They put the tag on him. 'Yerrout!' yelled the celestial umpire."

He looked at the lines. He had a taut sense of destiny in him. Once in every age, man and moment meet. And the man brings to that moment some ability that sets the world afire, that brings it lurching back from that last brink of destruction. The typewriter clattererd in the dusty office. He worked on at white heat, working with the sure and certain konwledge that what he was writing would lift up the hearts and hopes of men everywhere. The year of leave seemed to have heightened his facility. There was no rustiness, no groping for words, or for effect. He had it, and he was using it with the pride and assurance of a man at the peak of his abilities.

He ripped a sheet out, rolled a fresh one into the machine. He hit the tab set and . . . came to a shocked standstill on the shoulder of a dusty country road. He could see the countryside clearly, hear the faint bawling of cattle. And shimmering through it, directly in front of him, he could see the keyboard of the typewriter. It was as though he co-existed in two realities, one superimposed over the other. Standing in one, sitting in the other, visions overlapping. He managed to stand up blindly and move away

from the typewriter. The countryside faded and was gone.

He stood at the window of the small office for a time. The experience had made him feel faint and dizzy. He grunted with disgust. This would be a hell of a time to have the strain of the past year pile up on him and destroy his ability to work. This was, perhaps, the ultimate gamble. Lay it on the line for them. Get it all down. Dates, names, people, the delicate machinery of deals and counter deals. Show all the men of good will how close they had come to the political and economic equivalent of the Kingdom of Heaven. Pray that copies of the article would be pirated, smuggled through the fine mesh nets of censorship. Patrice, with her "me for me" philosophy could never understand how a man could stake his life on one turn of the card, if he believed in the card. A man could have a sense of destiny—believe in his heart that he could manufacture a pivot-point for the world to turn on. Let us have no more double vision. No time to go mad.

He went back and sat down at the typewriter again, re-read his lead, and found it good. He raised his hands a bit above the keys and stopped, shut his eyes hard. Each key had turned into a tiny reproduction of Patrice's face. With his eyes still shut he put his fingers on the keys, felt the softness of tiny faces under the pads of his fingers. He opened his eyes and looked at the paper in the machine. He began to type and stopped, as horror welled up to the point of nausea. His fingers were bloodied and the little faces were smashed, and he had heard the tiny cries, the rending of tissue. Sweating, he wiped his hands on his thighs as he stood up, knocking the chair over.

HE stood with his back to the machine and tightened his muscles until his shoulders ached. He looked cautiously at his fingertips. The blood was gone. Hallucination, then. A minor madness. He thought it out objectively. Self preservation, probably. Trying to save the organism from disaster. A glandular revolt against dissolution. He looked cautiously over his shoulder. The typewriter was sane, normal, familiar.

He sat down and began to type. His thoughts were fluent. His fingers could hardly keep up. He tore the second sheet out of the machine and read it.

"And so it is a baseball game and game and never the over of the now and the then and given. Tender and mathew and meatloaf the underside twisteth of the die and the perish now. All ye who enter can frenzied the window savior . . ."

The whole page was like that. Gibberish. Insanity. The stream of consciousness of an idiot who remembers words but has lost their meaning.

He tried again, writing more slowly. It was no good. He found a pencil in the table drawer. He took one of the copy sheets and tried to write. The pencil became too hot to hold. He examined blisters on his hand which faded even as he looked at them. The paper curled into flame, and he slapped it out. A moment later it was unscorched. He could no longer repress a primitive panic. He ran from the office and down the corrider, heart pumping, hands sweaty.

He did not quiet down until he was on the street. And suddenly he felt like an utter fool. Take a break and then go back and get it written. He walked to a small restaurant and sat at the counter and ordered coffee. The waitress was very gray and surly with a prono hangover. A tiny radio yipped like a terrier. He listened with half his mind.

". . . and late last night Darwin Branson, retired statesman and political philosopher was committed to Bronx Psychiatric Hos. . . ." The waitress had flipped the dial as she walked by.

"Would you mind getting that station back, Miss?"

"Yes, I'd mind. He already give all the news."

She stood braced, ready to blow up completely if he insisted. You couldn't argue with a prono hangover. He paid for his coffee, left the cup untouched and spent ten minutes on the corner before he could find a cab willing to take the long trip.

He reached the hospital at noon. He was suspected of being a reporter and the desk tried to bar him. He produced the confidential credentials Darwin had given him. The desk reluctantly put him in contact with the

resident doctor assigned to the case.

The doctor was young, unimaginative, and delighted with the case.

"Lorin you said? Worked for him, eh? Well, I suppose you can take a look. We've been checking him most of the morning. Come on."

They had Branson in a private room. A nurse was in attendance. She stood up as they came in. "Respiration is ten now, doctor. Heart forty-four. Temperature eight-six point six."

"Damndest thing I ever saw," the doctor said in a pleased tone. "Cops brought him in last night. Found him sitting in the middle of the sidewalk. Thought it was a pronie first. We checked him. He was apparently conscious. But no reaction to anything. Couldn't make the pupil contract. Couldn't find a single damn reflex."

Dake stared at the silent waxy face on the pillow.

The doctor said, holding out a clip board, "Just take a look at this chart. This is one that's going to be written up. Pulse, respiration, temperature—every one heading down in a line so straight it could have been drawn by a ruler. This man is just like a machine running down."

"Heart forty-two, Doctor," the nurse said softly, releasing the slack wrist.

"Tried every stimulant in the books, Mr. Lorin. No dice."

"What's your prognosis?"

"He just doesn't react to anything. Thought of encephaloma at first. Doesn't check out. It looks like he's just going to keep slowing down until he . . . stops. And there's no key in the back to wind him up. Damn unprofessional opinion, I guess, but that's the best I can do. Everybody in the place has seen him and suggested things. None of them work."

"Do you mind if I stay with him?"

"How about family? We've been unable to locate any."

"There isn't any."

"You can stay around if you want. I'll send an orderly in with another chair. From the way it looks, I don't think you'll have a long wait."

"You've never seen anything like it before, or heard of it?"

The young doctor frowned. "I've never seen one before. But I've heard rumors of others. Usually important people, come to think of it. They just seem to get . . . tired."

The doctor went out. An orderly brought another chair. Dake sat on the other side of the high bed from the nurse. He was on Darwin Branson's left side. He looked at the slack hand resting on the white sheet. Time now to forget the quarrel, and remember the better things—the good talks, the flexibility and dexterity of that wise brain.

"In my gullible years, Dake, back when I used to believe in statistics, I made a personal survey of the quality of major decisions and charted them. Of course, on the quality angle, I was being a Monday morning quarterback. I came up with a neat graph which alarmed me. Men of influence all over the world, men in high places, make wise decisions and the world improves. Then, all at once, their quality of judgment becomes impaired and the world suffers for it. They move in a vast confused flock, like sack-suited lemmings. Horrors, I was face to face with a cycle. Sun spots, addling the brains of men. Some alien virus in the air. Or God, perhaps, assuring His children of their suffering on earth."

"Did you find an answer?"

"Only in myself, where perhaps each man must find his answers. I resolved to so codify my beliefs that should I ever find myself tempted to betray my own philosophy, I would merely have to refer to my mental outline and make the decision which I would have made were I not subject to the cycle. I decided to risk Emerson's indictment of small minds."

And yet, thought Dake, you turned your back on your own beliefs only yesterday. You destroyed the labor of a full year. Horrid timing. You became ill a day too late, Darwin.

No more of those long good talks, no more of the knowledge of working for the greatest good of mankind.

"Dake, we seem to supply ourselves with destructive dreams. Chief among these is the Space Dream. It goes like this: We have made such a mess of our world that it is of no use to attempt to bring order out of our chaos. So save our best efforts for

the next green world. Tomorrow the moon, next week the planets, next year the galaxy. We'll spread through the heavens, and our seed will be the bronzed, steel-eyed pioneers, and their fertile women, making green wonderlands for us in the sky. That dream, Dake, eases the conscience of those who are doing less than their best. Thus it saps our energies. This is man's world. We must live here. We will never reach the stars. I would like to see every man believe that. And then if, in a thousand years, we break free, it will be pure profit—and we will have something beside hate and conflict to take along with us on the gleaming ships."

Dake thought how incredible it was that Darwin Branson should, on the last day of his life, make his first venture into opportunism.

He looked at the left hand, and then looked more closely, his breath catching in his throat. He remembered the scene just before he had left to meet Smith. Branson, being left-handed, had been trying awkwardly to snip off a hangnail on the middle finger of his left hand. Dake had volunteered help, which was gratefully received. The nail had been split a bit, and so he had pared it down carefully. That was the day before yesterday. Yet right now the nail was fully as long as the others. It could not possibly grow that fast. Dake knew he had not imagined the incident. It *had* been the left hand. He reached out and took the cool slack hand.

"Please don't touch the patient," the nurse said sharply.

He released the hand, stood up and bent over to stare more closely. He looked at the slack face, comatose, dying.

"What's the matter?" the nurse demanded.

Dake glanced at her. He knew at once how far he'd get if he tried to tell her this was not Darwin Branson. They'd have him in the next room down the hall. He sat down slowly, hoping that his emotions did not show on his face.

"Dake, I believe a fiddle-playing gentleman once commented that after you have ruled out all the impossibilities, that which remains is the solution. By the same token, if after all of the impossibilities have been ruled out, you have nothing left, then you have made a mistake in classification. You have overlooked a possibility by labeling it impossible. Like a man with a pocket lighter captured by aborigines. The wise man of the tribe says that it is impossible that there is lightning captured in that silver box. He says it is impossible that there is a tiny man in there, rubbing sticks together. He says it is impossible that fire can be made by any other than those two methods. So he falls down and worships, because he finds himself in the presence of the impossible. It was his third supposition that needed reclassification."

"Darwin, how about wrongly classifying the impossible as possible?"

"Men have tried to tri-sect the angle because that is an impossibility that *looks* possible. Conversely, man has never tried teleportation seriously. How do we know that may not merely be a possibility which happens to *seem* impossible, and would yield to sustained attack?"

"Pulse thirty-eight," the nurse said softly.

Dake looked at the yellow-gray face. God help me to think this out as you would have, Darwin, he said to himself.

HE HAD classified as "possible" Branson's sellout. But, knowing the man, it could more correctly be classified as impossible. Branson had been the man who said goodby to him when he went to collect Smith. So the man to whom he brought Smith back was not Branson. And, if the charts were right, not even human. A doll. A toy. A clever thing wound up and set in motion at a critical juncture in history for the purpose of substituting—or more correctly, sustaining—chaos in the place of possible peace and order.

Next step: Was any world power capable of creating this man-thing?

No. Reasoning: If so, the technique would have been used for greater selfish gain, and were this the first trial attempt, it would have been highly unlikely that Branson would be selected.

If the pseudo-physiology of this man-thing is beyond human abilities, then the only place of origin is extra-terrestrial.

But, to assume that means also to assume that there is some valid reason for the maintenance of world disorder. He caught the

error in his own logic. He was trying to judge the validity of extra-terrestial motivations on a human basis. He could almost imagine his skull swelling with the pressure of new concepts, new modes of thought.

Okay then. Assume that interference isn't in the form of a mile high space ship that sits down in the front yard. Assume it is something that comes delicately, insidiously. Unnoticed. What about duration? New, or has it been always with us?

He had an answer to that which was more instinctive than logical. More Fortian than objective. Because it solved, with one swift answer, the great dismal riddle of how man—basically a creature capable of love—had been unable to live in peace in his world.

Darwin Branson had always derided those theories which stated that the basic nature of man was evil, that there was some mysterious and tragic flaw called "human nature" or "man's destiny" which kept us all perpetually off balance.

Dake could hear the soft, even voice. "Evil is not within man, Dake. Evil is man's response to outward things—to hunger, disease, pain, fear, envy, hate. Maybe it is man's answer to insecurity. Take the common denominators that are not evil. Songbirds, flowers, motherhood. All times, all nations, all men have held them in esteem. We seem to have lost our way. Yet I cannot believe that we have turned our back on God, Buddha, Mohammet, Vishna. Rather we have been denied them in some curious way."

The answer to the riddle of the world—lying here on this hospital bed. If it could only be proven. Prove it and then you could cry to the skies, "We have been led! We have been tortured and twisted and set against each other! We have been a culture dish into which some agency has continually dropped acid—not enough to sterilize, but just enough to make us writhe."

How would you go about it. Autopsy? He looked at the grain of the skin, the ridged nails, the gray beard stubble. Clever, clever. They could cut the body and never find a soul. But, then, they had never found one and so could not recognize the absence.

As he became more certain, he slowly became aware of his great and dangerous knowledge. Any agency powerful enough and clever enough to effect this substitution would have a quick answer ready for any human who became suspicious, who tried to broadcast his knowledge.

Where was the real Darwin Branson?

"Pulse thirty-two," the nurse said.

The young doctor entered the room again, checked the chart, talked softly with the nurse. He thumbed an eyelid back, focused a light on the pupil. Another nurse brought in a tray. The doctor pulled the sheet back, swabbed a place over the heart, injected a needle deeply, pushed the plunger, emptying the hypodermic. He took the limp wrist and counted the pulse.

"Can't kick it up one beat a minute," he said, his voice too loud for the room.

Dake barely heard him. He sat, slowly compounding his own dilemma. There was an alternative he had overlooked. The reactions in the office Kelly had loaned him had been irrational. A sign of collapse. This whole new and startling train of thought could be another sign of collapse. No hangnail. No substitution. No extra-terrestials.

Before you could even think of proving something to the world, you had to first prove it to yourself. Either the aberrations in the office were evidences of "interference," as was the substitution, or both factors were indicative of imminent mental collapse—a collapse due to strain, overwork, tension.

He massaged the back of his neck. Funny feeling of tension there. Had it for a week. Almost a feeling of being watched. It would come and go. A feeling of a great eye focused on you. A big lens, and you were a bug on a slide.

Either one of two things happened at five minutes past three. Either Darwin Branson died, or the man-thing ran down and stopped, its function finished. Dake left the hospital. The death watch of reporters in the main lounge converged on him. He shouldered his way through, savage and silent. They cursed him as he left. He had no heart to go back to Kelly's place. The significance of the article he had wanted to write had dwindled. Either there was a vastly bigger article—or no article at all. He thought vaguely of trying to get back

the thirty thousand and decided there would be time enough the next day. He walked for blocks and caught a bus over to the island. A girl with brown hair and curiously pale gray eyes took the seat beside him.

V

THE girl with the brown hair and the pale and luminous gray eyes had watched the tall figure of Dake Lorin as he boarded the bus. She stood on the corner as the bus lumbered down the block. She fished in her blouse pocket for a cigarette, drew it out of the pack between two fingers, and hung it in the corner of her mouth, lit it with a casual, vulgar snap of the cheap lighter. Smoke drifted up along the smooth brown cheek. She stood there in her cheap tight yellow dress. Chippy on the make. As good cover as Miguel Larner had been able to devise for her.

And he had been thorough, in his remote, time-tested way, making her open her innermost screens for the hypno-fix of the cover story. You're Karen Voss. You're twenty-four.

Miguel had taped the fix from the fading brain of the actual Karen Voss. Thorough Miguel. A year back he had taken a job as a night orderly in a big hospital, smuggled the recorder in, and taken tapes off the ones on the way out of life. Better, he claimed, than inventing the cover. And it was better. It steamed the facts indelibly onto your brain patterns. No problem of learning how to stand, talk, walk or spit. And it gave Miguel a library of cover stories to apply when needed. Miguel's efficiency kept the staff down. And it overburdened the existing personnel, she thought bitterly.

She gave a drifter the cold eye, and wrinkled her nose at the reek of prono that followed him down the street. Observation first. She looked along the street slowly and found only three probables. Chances were they'd used only one Stage Two agent on this. And if the hospital was hot to get at the autopsy, he'd be jackrabbit busy making the technicians see brain convolutions where there were none. Lorin would be out from under until they picked him up again.

Observation first, and then, with screens drawn tight, a quick probe at the possibles. She tried the old lady first, the dawdling window-shopper. The probe sank deep, with none of that almost metallic ping of probe against agent screen. The old lady winced and rubbed her temple. Same with the taxi driver fiddling with the motor. That was a soft mind. Babyfood mush. She hit it almost too hard. The man dropped the wrench with a clang and his knees sagged. He straightened up slowly and rubbed his eyes. She hit the third one, the man leafing through the magazine on the far corner. A good firm mind, that one. But no ping. No screens. The impact gave him a quick frown. The man took off his glasses and held them up to the light, put them back on again.

Karen Voss didn't like the next step. This was the moment when they could punish you, knock you frothing and epileptic to the sidewalk, crunching your own bones with the muscle spasms that were the penalty for carelessness.

She lifted the outer screen, with all the caution of a kid peeking under a circus tent. With it up, you had a receptivity, but not enough. You had to get all four up, one after the other, and stand there naked. The time lap in receptivity of the potential gave them time to hit you with a full broadside.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four. All up. Naked in the daylight. Naked brain-stuff itching at the thought of the plunge. She attuned herself slowly up through the bands. She began receiving in the middle range. As she suspected, a Stage Two. But distant. A good hundred yards away. And only one. She brought him into closer focus, yet remaining too remote for detection. No need. He had his hands full. She could tell by the rhythm that he was producing illusion for three, or possibly four earthlings. Get any more on the scene and he might yelp for help, and as the help might come in the form of a Stage Three, Karen decided she'd better move.

Fourthreetwoone. Clack. All back and down and tight and trim. All armor in place. Now the bus. Three blocks away. Four. She dropped her cigarette, stamped daintily on it, and walked with chippy hipswitch to the corner, bland-eyed and arrogant. She wore the Pack B on the inside of her wide stiff belt. It was handiest there.

She could casually hook one thumb inside the belt and work the three tiny knurled wheels. Same Senarian principle as the space cubes and the parent web, limited by the speed of thought. But even the Senarians couldn't give you anything but a primer version. Any more than they could repair anything beyond the simplest circuits in that huge satellite brain that circled their old home planet, and was such a shrine to the heart planets. And that brain, built by the Senarian's remotest ancestors had given them the parent web and the Pack B too many thousand years ago to count.

SHE could remember the manual you got at Training T when they broke you in on the Pack B. "The Pack B must be considered as a device to focus and concentrate the power of thought. Practice in visualization is highly important in utilization of Pack B. The student will carefully examine each detail of a selected portion of the game field. The student will then walk one hundred paces from that spot. The student will imagine himself standing on that selected spot with all the power of concentration and vizualization. The first wheel, marked (1) in the illustration, reduces the effective value of the mass of the student to a minus power. The second wheel, marked (2) must be set for the desired range. Set the second wheel first. Visualize. Turn the first wheel one-half revolution clockwise. Turn the third wheel, marked (3), one click. If visualization is strong enough the third, or selector wheel, will reinstate effective mass at the point of visualization. After practice this can become an almost instantaneous factor. The effective range is ten thousand yards. This same principle activates the parent web and the space cubes, though in that instance, the visualization, being generated by the parent web, is of such a high order, and the power source is so great that there are no effective limits to the range. The speed of thought is the final barrier. Beyond that any further acceleration would be contra-temporal."

But of course one could not go about among the earthlings appearing and disappearing. It would upset them. Miguel became furious if you didn't use the utmost caution. Get away from prying eyes when you make the jump. You have two seconds of relative invisibility at the new location. So use those two seconds to make certain you are not observed, and if there's a chance, click it again to select the departure point and try again.

She moved into a sheltering doorway, made certain no one could see her, and then visualized herself standing on a corner watching the bus lumbering toward her a half block away. She brought into sharp focus the details of the bus.

Two, one, three. A twisty little wrench in the head, and there's the bus, heading for you. She looked around quickly. One man in range. To him she would be the faintest silvery shimmer. She stepped behind a post, felt the quick flooding weight. She patted her brown hair, favored the man with an insolent look of appraisal. Stuffy Miguel would have frowned at that post routine. The man looked faintly startled at not having noticed her before, probably.

She pulled herself up onto the bus, dropped her fare in the box and went back, pleased to see that Lorin was sitting by himself. She eased down beside him with a pleased little sigh. Poor bewildered earthling. A good somber strength in that face. Good level mouth on him. Suddenly she remembered a very ordinary trick that she had almost overlooked. She probed quickly and lightly, felt no screen. She sighed again.

Illusions for the big man. It would take illusions to get him back to Miguel without risk of interception. Too bad direct control was so readily detectable, so obvious that anyone could catch it with just the first screen down, and catch it a mile away or more.

Trouble with illusions, they made the earthlings crack so easily. And Miguel wanted him intact. The bus speakers droned their inevitable commercials. And this lad had already had a liberal dosage of illusion.

She cast about for a reasonable idea, something that wouldn't disrupt the other passengers. She saw a vast fat man pull himself aboard, come down the aisle sweating and puffing. The sudden hard jolt against her outermost screen shocked her. The brain made its lightning calculation of probability. She pulled all screens tight,

probed the fat man. In the same split second as the hard expected "ping" occurred, she slid the stud on the catch of her handbag—a fraction of a second too late. He had blanketed her, and she retaliated quickly. Deadlock. Neither of them could yell for help now. She turned casually. He had taken the seat behind them. She looked into his bland eyes.

This time, she realized with sinking heart, they had miscalculated badly. Miguel Larner, in spite of the Branson fiasco, had thought he could retrieve it with the assignment of two Stage Two agents. So far she could count five that Shard had assigned.

The fat man tried a probe again. Apparently he thought she was a Stage One, who could be broken down. It reduced her respect for him, but that respect returned immediately as she realized he had used it as a feint, that he was busy on an illusion. A very respectable illusion. A uniformed policeman angrily waving the bus into a side street. It was almost real enough to deceive her. She thought quickly. Block the side street with something.

A blow crashed against the back of her head. As she fell forward off the seat, she cursed her own stupidity in not thinking of a definite physical attack, the most elementary move, and therefore one of the cleverest. Though consciousness slipped a bit, she held the screens tight, recovered. Lorin was helping her up.

"That fat guy hit me in the back of the head, mister!"

Lorin turned. "What's the idea, friend?"

This time Karen Voss was ready with the illusion. The fat fist struck Dake Lorin in the face so quickly that Karen guessed Dake had no chance to notice that the fat man's arms had stayed at his sides. She was pleased to note that Lorin had beautiful reflexes. The fat man's head snapped back and he crumpled in the seat. She probed deeply and viciously, realizing with satisfaction that Shard would be minus one Stage Two agent until probe wounds healed, in six months. She had broken through the first two screens.

She saw a chance to simplify things. Illusion made the fat man's head flop over at a crazy angle. This could be done with artistry. She gave the passengers a loud male voice. "Hey, you killed him!"

She took the stunned Lorin by the arm. "Come on, let's get off this thing. There's going to be trouble."

She yanked the cord and pushed at Lorin, followed him to the front of the bus. He got off blindly. She took his wrist. "Come on." People yelled at them. No one pursued. They would quiet down when they saw the fat man was all right.

KAREN hurried down the block with him and around a corner. She stopped and leaned against the side of a scabrous building, dipped again into her blouse pocket to bring out a cigarette and hang it on her lower lip. Lorin lit the cigarette for her with a hand that trembled. She could sense his emotions. Distaste for her, annoyance with the situation, a vague shame that he had run. She knew that he was a troubled man, as who wouldn't be with the illusions Shard's agent had provided for him to block the newspaper article. Yet she was slightly uneasy. She had studied Branson and Lorin. She knew them well. And now Lorin seemed a bit *too* upset. She wished she dared take him under full control. He might be hard to handle.

"I cert'ny want to thank you, mister."

"That's all right. I hope I didn't get us in trouble, Miss."

"Karen. Karen Voss. I bet I know you. I bet you're Dake Lorin. I used to see your picture next to your column all the time."

He looked mildly pleased. "Don't tell me you used to read it."

"Sure. Maybe you wouldn't think so. I go for that stuff. Politics, economics, international relations. I got a friend. He's got money. Lots of money. He was saying just the other day he'd like to see you back in business. He says you used to make a lot of sense. Maybe he'd back you—buy space in a paper or something."

"The Public Disservice Act keeps anyone from saying anything very critical, Miss Voss. I don't think your friend would want to join me on a shale pile."

She snorted. "Nobody touches him. Not twice anyway. I guess you heard of him. Miguel Larner."

"The racketeer? Certainly I've heard of

him. He's got his hands in every filthy . . ."

"Don't go pious, Mr. Lorin. Mig has got . . . well, two sides to his nature. He might be a lot of help to you." She was secretly amused at her words. "He's a good friend of mine. Want to go see him?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe you're in some kind of trouble. He likes helping people. You wouldn't think so, would you? But he does."

"I don't think there's anything he can do for me."

"You in a rush? You got an appointment or something? It isn't far."

She could sense his indecision. She urged him gently. At last he agreed reluctantly. She broke the connection by sliding the stud on the catch of her bag. Miguel would have heard Lorin agree. He'd be ready. She walked beside the tall man, alert for any form of interception. She hailed a cab, settled back in the seat beside Lorin, giving him a mechanical sultry smile, crossing her round brown legs.

By the time they reached 215th Street he said, accusingly, "Not far?"

"Just a couple more blocks, honey."

The cab let them off. Lorin paid the fare. She saw his quick curious glance at the sleek above-ground lobby. As they passed through the doorway Karen felt the barrier break, fold shut again behind them. She gave the traditional sigh of relief that came up from the stubbed toes of her shabby pumps. Nothing could touch her in here. Nothing could reach into the warm security of the egg-shaped barrier. The pointed end of the egg was above-ground making a small dome over the entrance. The rest of the egg encircled all the levels below-ground. Here Miguel Larner, Stage Three, presided over the agent teams, routed the field operations, maintained the communications network. Usually, the moment she was inside, she could erase the Karen Voss hypno-fix temporarily and revert to her own identity. But with Lorin in tow she had to keep her makeup on.

The Stage One at the desk had been alerted.

"We want to go down and see Mr. Larner, Johnny." *How did I do?*

"I guess you can go right on down, Miss Voss." *Nice going, lady.*

"Thanks, Johnny." *And scratch one Stage Two.*

"You're welcome, Miss Voss." *Don't get too many credits. We'll miss having you around.*

She led the way back to the elevator. As it slid silently down the shaft she gratefully let the rest of the screens slip. She had released the first one to permit communication with the Stage One at the desk. She felt warmly proud of herself, knowing that she had come out of this with a credit. One step closer to the heart worlds, my girl. One step closer to Training T to become a Stage Three, and then one more tour and you're out of it, and you can go to work. Next time, by God, they'll have to do better than this chippy cover. The fix went a little too deep. You had to watch your reflexes.

"Have you known Larner long?"

"A pretty long time. Here we are." The door slid back and they walked directly from the elevator into the main room of Larner's suite. It was a garish room, furnished with the best that Bombay supply houses could offer. One whole wall was a vast and intricate diorama, portraying a walled garden with a pool. Miguel spent a lot of his time by the pool, and the perspective was so cleverly done that it gave the impression of being a vast open space, rather than a twenty by twenty cube cut into bedrock. Miguel kept the controls set in such a way that the diorama changed through each hour of the twenty-four, from cloudless days to full-moon nights.

Miguel was sitting out by the pool in the four o'clock sunlight, a chunky sun-browned man with very little forehead and eyes like oiled anthracite. He wore lemon-yellow bathing trunks, and had a glass in his hand.

He waved casually. "How's it going, Karen? Come on out. Who's your friend?"

THEY went out by the pool. "Don't you recognize him, Mig? It's Dake Lorin." *Is this going to be one or two credits? I broke down a Stage Two.*

Miguel reached up with a languid hand. "Nice to know you, Mr. Lorin." *I suppose you were too busy congratulating yourself to scan properly. Take another look and see*

why it's only one credit for not seeing the obvious.

"I was telling Dake how you always liked his stuff, Mig." *All right, so I missed it. But when you assign two and they assign five, it keeps you busy. I see what you mean. Carelessness. Something about a fingernail.*

"I've missed your column, Mr. Lorin. Used to get a charge out of it, the way you hacked at everybody." *Yes, they should have had somebody there ready with an illusion, checking to see if Lorin accepted the doll.* "Have a drink, folks? Sit down."

They took poolside chairs. "Gee, I'd go for a collins. How about you, Dake?" *Are you getting what I'm getting, Miguel? He's balanced on the edge. It's a little beyond his credibility, and he is wondering about his own sanity.*

Miguel pushed a button. The servant appeared almost at once. He gave the orders. *So we must be very careful, girl. A little push might send him over the edge. Once we use him, maybe we can run a check and see. But I don't think he'd make it. Rigidity there. Father image. Streak of the Puritan. Somber Messiah. They seldom check through. Too dependent on the nature of reality.*

"Hasn't Mig got a nice place here, Dake?" *Don't forget the quota. He might do very nicely.*

"I guess I could be classified as unemployed right now, Mr. Larner," Dake said. "I've been working for the government for a year. And today my . . . superior died. A bit suddenly. It was sort of unofficial employment, so I guess that ends it."

"Weren't you working for Branson?" Miguel asked.

"Why yes! How did you know that?"

"I got sources. I have to keep in touch. Anything Branson did might effect imports and exports. And anything that effects those, changes my income. You got any plans, Mr. Lorin?"

"I'm writing a newspaper article for Thursday publication."

"Hot?"

"It would have been hotter if Mr. Branson hadn't died. It will probably be classified as a Disservice to the State."

"Putting your head in the noose, eh?"

"I suppose you could call it that. It just seems . . . more important than what can happen to me. Trouble though, is that it's critical of Darwin Branson. He's the man who died today."

"You need a place to work?"

"Thanks, no. A man is letting me use an office."

"If it doesn't work out, I got a place here you can use. A nice setup." *Do you want to fix Kelly, girl? Now that we have him here I want him to stay.*

"This would be a nice quiet place to work, Dake," Karen said. *Let Dake do it. I've been outside too long. It made hash of my nerves, Miguel. See how restless he is getting? He wants to leave.*

"I changed my mind, Karen," Miguel said. "This is easier. I just put him under full control."

She looked quickly at Lorin, saw the automaton rigidity of his posture, the eyes in trance. *But how can you . . .*

"Aloud, please. Para-voice is an insidious habit on tour. The easiest way to keep him here is to take full control. Let him believe he went back to Kelly and Kelly changed his mind and gave him a refund of his money, and backed out. Then we'll release him up above in the lobby with the idea he has come here to take up my offer. It just seems simpler. Ready now, and I'll turn him over to you. Take him to one of the rooms upstairs and give him the complete memory pattern of seeing Kelly and coming back here at, say, nine this evening. Leave him in stasis up there and then you can rest and take him up to the lobby at nine."

Karen waited. When Miguel released Lorin she caught him deftly. There was a split second of release in which Lorin stirred and made a faint sigh, almost a moan. Then she had him. As she went through the wide doors into the main room and toward the elevator, she looked back and saw him following her with that odd walking-on-eggs stride of the controlled. There was always a pathetic vulnerability about the controlled which touched her. It seemed particularly poignant in this case, all the tall hard strength of the man following as docile as a lamb.

She took the elevator up two levels and walked him down a corridor to an empty

room. Lorin sat on the edge of the bed, turned stiffly, lifted his feet up, and lay back, eyes open and staring, arms rigid at his side.

Karen sat on the edge of the bed and quickly took him through all the mechanical actions of returning to New Jersey, talking to Kelly, listening to the man's protestations, accepting the refund, returning to the city. She took him on an aimless walk, had him eat a solitary meal, decide to take Miguel's offer, and return to the apartment. She stopped the visualization the moment he stepped through the door, through the barrier. It was the work of but five minutes to give him the entire visualization, and it took another few seconds to push consciousness even further back so that he would remain in stasis until she called to get him.

With an impulse that surprised her a bit, she bent over and kissed his unconscious lips lightly. Poor big oaf. Poor bewildered earthling, torn this way and that. Pawn in a game he'd never know. She kissed her fingertip, touched the middle of his forehead, smiled down at him, and left the room, shutting the door quietly, even though it would have made no difference at all if she had slammed it.

VI

KELLY stubbornly pushed the money back across the desk. He said, "Now take it, Mr. Lorin. I already told you. I've reconsidered. I don't think that disclaiming the article would give me enough immunity. They'd wonder why I accepted it."

Dake wearily pocketed the money, stood up. "I guess there's nothing I can do but look for someone else."

Kelly leaned back in his chair. "Now if you'd come to me with a little better backing. Say with a note from Mig Larner, or somebody like that . . ."

"What made you mention his name?"

"I was just using him as an example. If Mig says you won't get in trouble, you won't. He keeps all the right wheels, greased, that lad does."

Dake left Kelly's place. It was after six. He had a long search for a cab. Once he was back in Manhattan he got off at New Times Square. Strange day. Darwin . . . or what was supposed to be Darwin . . . dying like that. He felt strange. Almost unreal. It was an odd sensation, as though his side vision was impaired, as though he could only see straight ahead, and everything else was a grayness, a nothingness. It was the same with sounds. He kept hearing sharp individual sounds, but the background noise of the city seemed to be missing. It seemed to him as though there were some serious impairment of all his senses. Yet, oddly, he could not seem to bring himself to stop and check that impairment—to turn his head quickly, to listen consciously for all the background noise. And those people he did see, those normal characters of the streets were subtly altered. Colors had slightly different values. And his instinctive and automatic appraisals seemed distorted.

He found a quiet restaurant where he had never been before. He ordered a sweet drink which normally he despised. And found it surprisingly good. He ordered a very light meal, and yet it seemed to satisfy him completely. The world was a bit out of focus, and yet he could not capture his wandering attention and apply his intelligence to a thorough appraisal of exactly where and why it was out of focus.

After he finished the meal he decided that the next step was definitely to return to see Miguel Larner. He decided to work it from a different angle this time. Complete the article, and then find someone willing to print it, either free or for a fee. Let the article speak for itself. Let the public learn exactly what Stephen Chu and Garva had been willing to do. Let them learn about the trade concessions Gondohl Lahl had promised. Let them learn that the enemy coalitions were, behind their brave front, pathetically eager to effect a compromise, achieve a period of stability. And show them all how the conversation with Smith had destroyed this chance.

He was surprised at how quickly time had gone. He stepped out of the cab in front of Larner's place at nine o'clock, paid the man and walked into the lobby. He walked in and stumbled on the smooth floor for no reason at all, caught himself. There had been an odd little twist, or click, and now side vision had returned, he could

hear the full range of sound, colors had their former values.

That odd girl from the bus was leaning on the clerk's desk. Voss. Karen Voss. He wondered why he hadn't wasted a single thought on the fat man in the bus since leaving Larner's place that afternoon. Pretty damn callous to kill a stranger and forget it.

"Hi there, Dake," Karen said. "Just talking about you. Remember the fat man on the bus?"

"I certainly do."

"I guess it looked worse than it was. You just knocked him out. Heard that he's okay. I had Mig check on it."

"I still can't understand why he hit you. I'm damn glad to hear he's okay."

"Maybe I reminded him of somebody who picked his pocket once. And maybe I did. I've got a lousy memory. How do you like the dress?"

She whirled the full skirt. He said, "I guess I like it. Little daring, though. That style is older than you know. The women of Crete started it a long, long time ago."

"All I know is that Mig had it flown over from Madras." She took his arm. "Mig is psychic. He told me you'd be back. I'll go down with you. 'By, Johnny." *I'm starting to like this big lug. Did you see him blush? That's a lost art.*

"Come back, Miss Voss." *Don't get the geef over any earthling, lamb. There's no future in it.*

Poo.

On the way down in the elevator, Dake felt his cheeks grow hot again. He said, "Are you a . . . uh . . . special friend of Mr. Larner?"

She squeezed his arm. "I guess I give him a few laughs. That's all."

He was embarrassed at his own show of interest. There was something pleasingly child-like about this Karen Voss, but he knew that she was one cheap, tough, hard little article. It was in her stance, her eyes, the shape of her mouth. That opaque quality of sexual arrogance of one of those little girls who have learned too much too fast.

"Does Mr. Larner ever go out?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I just had the strong feeling that he didn't. That maybe he wouldn't be safe on the outside."

He looked down into speculative luminous gray eyes. She was standing so close to him that he could see the little amber flecks that ringed the pupil. He decided that it was the high quality of the intelligence of those eyes which was so startingly at odds with the chippy walk, the too-tight clothes, the insolent curve of lip.

"Not as bright as all that," she said.

He stared at her. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

For a moment she looked genuinely disconcerted. Then she threw her head back and her throat pulsed in a raw vulgar bellow of laughter. "Now I'm getting psychic yet. Or maybe we're soulmates, sugar. Ever think of that?"

MIGUEL LARNER was in his diorama garden, in the long sweet dusk of a mid-summer evening which contrasted with the October night in the city above. Sound tracks gave to scrupulous perfection the muted night-cries of insects, the fluid silver of a distant nightingale, the garrump of a conclave of frogs in a bog on the far side of the meadow.

"Hey, Mig! He came back like you said." *And he caught me off guard in the elevator. I could swear he was sending on the paravoice band, and doing it perfectly.*

"Sit down, people. Glad you came back, Lorin. Especially if it means I can help you." *I noticed how clear he was this afternoon. A latent, perhaps.*

Dake sat down as soon as Karen was seated. "As a matter of fact, the man who was going to print the article backed out. And returned my money. That didn't seem in character. I've got it here. I thought perhaps you could . . . That's damn funny! I put it right here in this pocket."

Girl, you seem to be making a habit of being careless with this one.

Karen laughed. "A demonstration, Dake. I wanted to show you how an expert picks a pocket. I did it on the elevator." *Decent recovery, Miguel?*

Thirty thousand rupees, girl. Let's see the illusion.

Dake took the money Karen handed him. He handed it to Miguel. "Here's thirty thousand rupees, Mr. Larner. I wonder if you could use it to get me a spot where the article will get a decent readership."

If he's a latent, Miguel, wouldn't that help?

Screens raised, eh. Afraid I'll see the sudden emotional interest in this one.

Let me give him a strong primary impulse and see if he's latent receptive too.

All this will wait until we've used him as a countermove against Shard. In another moment I might get impatient with you, girl.

Miguel took the money, shoved it casually into his shirt pocket. "Lorin, you're not hiring me with this. I'm just keeping it for you. You go ahead and write the article. I'll find a spot for it. And give you the change. Why don't you stay right here? One of my secretaries is on vacation. Complete apartment with no one in it."

"I wouldn't be in the way?"

"Not a damn bit. Give me your local address and I'll send somebody over for your stuff."

"Just a hotel room. "I've been living in hotel rooms ever since going with Branson."

"I'll have you checked out then."

Dake gave Miguel the name of the hotel. Miguel said, "Show him where he hangs his hat, Karen. Next floor above, Dake. End of the hall. Give Johnny a ring, Karen, and tell him Mr. Lorin is in 7 C, for an indefinite stay."

They left the diorama garden. Dusk had faded into night. Karen took him up in the elevator and down to 7 C. The door was unlocked; Karen went in first, flipping the light switches, activating the diorama. It was a moonlit seascape with a sound track of waves against the beach.

"Very luxurious," Dake said.

What?

"I said it's very luxurious." He glanced at her, wondered why she wore such a smug look, as though she had proved something to herself.

"It's got a liquor cupboard too, Dake. Build you a drink?"

"If you'd like. I think I need a drink. This has been . . . one of the craziest days of my life."

She had her back to him, sitting on her heels, looking into the liquor cabinet. *Scotch okay for you?*

"Are you a ventriloquist or something, Karen?"

She turned toward him. "Why?"

"Your voice had the funniest quality right then. Seemed to come from all corners of the room at once."

"Used to sing a little. Maybe that's it. Why has this been a crazy day, Dake?"

"I ought to talk to somebody. Just let me ramble, even if it doesn't make sense to you. That sounded pretty superior, didn't it?"

"Not too. You couldn't expect me to follow everything you could say."

She brought him a tall drink. "Kashmiri Dew. Eight years old." She perched on the arm of his chair, rather disturbingly warm against his arm. "Mind?"

"N-no. I guess what's troubling me the most is wondering if I'm losing my mind."

"Don't they say that if you're wondering about it, you aren't?"

"I don't have much faith in that. I've always been a sort of functional pragmatist?"

"Don't make the words too big, Professor."

"If I could see something, feel it, touch it, smell it, hit it with my fist, then it existed. And my actions were based on thought which in turn was based on realities."

"I sort of get it, sugar."

"So today reality began to go sour on me. Typewriter keys don't bleed. A man's fingernail doesn't grow a quarter of an inch in two days. And ever since I left here this afternoon, until I got back, everything was curiously unreal. Like I was walking and talking in a dream. When I couldn't find that money in my pocket, I began to think it *was* a dream."

"What's this typewriter keys and fingernails routine?"

"Little things where my senses didn't send the right messages to my brain. As if I suddenly saw you walk across the ceiling."

"Shall I?"

"Don't look at me like that. I begin to think you can. Anyway, what has a man got to hold onto except reality?"

"Okay, sugar. I rise to ask a question. I'll name a list. Faith, hope, love, honor. Can you touch them, smell them, hit them with your fist?"

"Those items are the result of thought regarding other concrete items which can be detected with the senses."

She turned and kissed him suddenly. Her

eyes danced. "I'm beginning to get it, Professor. You could feel that, couldn't you. But if it ended up in you loving me, you would only get that from . . . from inference."

"I get the damndest feeling that you're way ahead of me. And don't do that again."

"If you don't like it, I won't. Let's continue the discussion, Professor. Let's play suppose. Like that guy Midas. Everything he touched turned to gold. Okay. According to you he should have gone nuts. But he didn't. He starved to death. What was that? Strong-brain? Suppose an ordinary guy. A guy like you. His world starts to frazzle on the edges. Wouldn't he have enough pride to keep telling himself that he was okay? That something was doing it to him, on purpose?"

"Persecution complex, eh. So he's crazy anyway."

"Suppose another thing. Suppose this precious reality of yours that you like so well, suppose all that is fiction, and when you begin to see crazy things, you're seeing the real reality."

"You have a very unique mind, Karen."

"The adjective has been used on me before. But not that way, sugar."

"You should have done more with yourself. That quality of imagination is a bit rare."

"You know, Dake, you're a little on the stuffy side. How about if I like me the way I am? How about that?"

He grinned. "My reformer instinct always crops out. Forgive me."

"You said it was funny this afternoon after you left here. How?"

"Colors looked odd. People looked odd. I had the feeling that I wasn't seeing or hearing as much as I should."

"So this style started in Crete. How veddy veddy interesting!"

He quickly averted his eyes and felt his face get hot again. She laughed at him. It's no trick to read your mind sometimes, Lorin, old man."

"Look, I don't want to be too stuffy, but . . ."

"I have the idea Patrice wouldn't care."

He frowned at her. "Dammit, that's about enough. I know I didn't mention her to you. You've got a lot of extra-sensory perception or something."

"I read the gossip columns. Sort of a cold dish, isn't she?"

"Miss Voss, you pry. Now, out! I'm going to try to do some work."

She slid off the arm of the chair, winked blandly at him. "All right, dear. Use the phone for food. They bring it down. All the office stuff is through that door. Your clothes and things ought to be over soon."

He found that the small office was beautifully equipped, and as clean as an operating room. He worked on the article, regaining the free flow of words which he had experienced in the office borrowed from Kelly. He used the same lead, tightening it a bit, altering it to include the death of Branson.

After an hour of work he went out to phone for food. He was famished again. His clothes had been brought, neatly unpacked in the bedroom. The food was brought. He worked for another hour and then went to bed. He sat on the edge of the bed in his pajamas. He put his feet up and lay back. A funny example of *déjà vu*, he thought. As though he *had* been in this room before. Or a room very like it. With Karen. She had sat on the edge of the bed. Later she had kissed his lips. She had told him something. Something about Kelly. It was so difficult to. . . .

Sleep came quickly. The dream was as crazy as the day. Myriad voices echoing inside his skull. He couldn't get them out. They were little people, trudging around in there. Pinching and prodding his brain. Nibbling at the edges with tiny rodent teeth. Yelling at each other. All talking at once. Commenting on him. Hey, look at this. And this over here! What do you know? Pinch and prod and nibble, and all the voices going like too many records playing at once. Definitely latent. And a receptive. But a fracture line here, and here. Father image. Won't do. Won't do at all. But look at this.

He woke up, sitting up, hearing his own roar of "Get Out!" still lingering in the silent air-conditioned room. He was sweaty and chilled. He pulled the blanket up over him. Damn stupid to accept Miguel Larner's hospitality. Well, use any means if the end is good. Damn destructive philosophy, however, if you overdid it.

VII

IT WAS a fine summer morning on Manarr. The sun beamed hot on the shallow placid seas, on the green rolling traces of the one-time mountains. The fibirds dipped over the game fields, teetering on membranous green wings, yelping like the excited children. Picnic day. Picnic day. Everyone was coming, as everyone had always come. Hurrying from the warm pastels of the small houses that dotted the wide plains, hurrying by the food stations, the power boxes. Hooray for the picnic day. The smallest ones set their tiny jump-sticks at the widest settings and did crazy clumsy leaps in the warm air, floating, sprawling, nickering. The maidens had practised the jump-stick formations and groups of them played towering floating games of leapfrog on the way to the game fields. spreading wide their skirts, swimming through the perfect air of this day. The young men watched and bounded and set their jump-sticks narrow to do the hard quick tricks. Picnic day. Today there would be water sculpture, and sky dancing, and clowns. Day of laughter, evening of the long songs, night of mating. Time for work tomorrow. The hard work that cramped the brain and so often brought ears, under the unforgiving eye, the cold trim face of the earthling. Someone had said that today the earthling would judge the water sculpture, lead the sky dance. Few believed it.

—Ten parsecs beyond the outermost star system the great ship rested. It had been built in space. No planet crust could withstand its weight, and thus it had never felt the full tug of gravity at close range. It was the flagship for a full division. On the master control cube, three dimensional diagram of a galaxy, tiny red spheres showed the placement of each ship of the division. In this hour it was a nervous ship. Quick flick of eyes. Lick of tongue tip across dry lips. Silence. The launch had arrived an hour ago. At last the bell called all officers. They hurried to central assembly, stood in formation at attention.

After five minutes the earthling arrived, with his cold and bitter eyes, the flat iron slab of a face, wearing his symbols of command. The prisoner was taken to the vast open space in the middle of the hollow square of the formation.

They said he could give you a writhing agony with a mere glance, read your most secret thoughts, turn you to a mindless thing. The officers stood like statues.

The harsh voice of the earthling filled the huge room. "Officers. Observe the prisoner. He commanded a ship. He forgot the need for endless vigilance." The prisoner stood with a face like death.

"They came once. They came out of the blackness between the galaxies. They would not communicate. They were merely a patrol. Yet it took the total strength of the galaxy to hurl them back. They will come again, in strength. We are stronger now, yet not strong enough. The prisoner grew bored with vigilance. For two thousand years there has not been one second of relaxation. Nor will there be until they return, as they inevitably will. Remove the prisoner."

He was marched away, head bowed.

The earthling said, in a quieter tone, "Defense cannot remain static. Every ship in this division is obsolete." There was a stir and murmur in the ranks of officers.

"The first ship of the new class is being assembled. It has better shields, heavier weapons, a new and more effective hyperdrive. This crew has been selected for immediate return and training. I shall transfer command headquarters to one of your sister ships. On your return with the new ship I will once again command the division from your ship. Within five years complete replacement of the ships of this division will be effected. Obsolete ships will be placed in reserve. Patrol areas will be twice as far from the galactic rim as we are now. I have recommended brief leave for each of you on his or her home planet. Dismissed."

—At Bionomic Research they had all been uneasily aware of the new earthling who had replaced gentle, easy-going The'dran. But the long days drifted by and they slowly became used to his habit of roaming through the low gray buildings. They prepared the metal tapes which listed, in minute detail, the almost infinite ecological factors of the unbalanced planets and fed them through

the whispering calculators, getting the slow results that so often looked like utter nonsense. It was very slow work, but who could hasten it? Nature moved slowly. If the answer was to eliminate one certain type of shrub on such and such a planet, who was to hasten it? In perhaps fifty of the planet years in question, elimination of the shrub would have caused the extinction of a certain class of insect which in turn was the food source for a specific class of lizard which restricted the natural watershed by tunneling too indiscreetly among tree roots and stunted growth.

So they began to accept the earthling as a symbol, and nothing more.

Until one day, in a cold flat voice, and with unfriendly eyes, he called them parasites and time-wasters and fools. He revised all the old ways, formed them into research teams, assigned one field team to each research team, demanded synchronized recommendations, with a target date for putting them into effect. The old ways were gone. The slow warm days. Now it was hurry, hurry. Planets must be bionomically balanced, with resources utilized toward the setting of an optimum population level. Transportation of necessities between planets is a waste. Hurry, hurry, hurry. It should have been done yesterday, the day before yesterday. Please the earthling with your energy, or end up at Centre with your technical qualification erased and your number changed to manual labor.

—On Training T, far from the power webs, far from the intricate geometric pattern of the space cubes, gleaming on the vest metallic plain, far from the black training buildings and the instruction beams, a Stage Two wept. The mind, seemingly strong, flexible, elastic, had not been able to take the Stage Three instruction. A hidden fracture line. They would not go on with it. Another attempt would result in mindlessness. He was a strong bitter powerful man, graduate of the Irish slums of New Orleans. With fists and teeth and grinding ambition he had fought his way up. And he wept because here, so very clearly, so very precisely, was the end of the line. Yet a young girl,—linguist, dreamer, poet—had made it, knew what her assignment would eventually be.

—In Madrid, behind the egg-shaped barrier that enclosed and concealed the luxuries of the sun-bleached castle, Shard checked the agent credits, made out his requisition for personnel. Forty Ones, sixteen Twos, two Threes. No Stage Three could keep track of his own credits. He realized sourly that the filling of the requisition in total would be his only indication that he had served well in this, his third tour. He yearned to be rid of the stinking, brawling, sniveling billions, to be clear of the miasmic stench of fear and hate. Endless battle for a world. An endless stirring of the pot.

He asked that the Gypsy girl be brought in. She had a boldness he liked, a boldness stronger than her fear. He produced illusions for her, watching her mind closely, always slanting the illusions more and more closely toward the secret focus of all her fears. Knives and worms and things with claws that crawled. Nineteen, she was, yet through her man she had been leading her tribe of *gitanos* for over two years, and leading them with an iron will, leading them well.

He turned her breasts to lizard heads and her fingers to tentacles and she fainted, blood on her mouth. Yet when she revived, she spat at him and cursed him, with *flamenca* fury. She would do. One of the unbreakable ones. One of the precious bitter ones.

Shard took her down the slanting tunnel to the small space station. He took her personally. A signal honor. He touched the stud and the orifice slit in the gray cube opened. He thrust her in, reached in and touched the guide stud for Training T, stepped back. The cube shimmered, irridescent. Projected thought of the power web of the parent planets, caught here in plus mass stasis. It changed from pink to a watery greenish silver, and then, achieving minus mass, it disappeared at once, the air filling the vacuum with pistol shot sound. Little gypsy, who now would age one year in ten. Shard stood, wishing somberly that they had enlisted him at nineteen, rather than at forty. Yet, at nineteen, he hadn't been ready, as she was ready. At nineteen

he would have broken, utterly. She might break, under training. He doubted it. He had seen too many. He walked back up the tunnel, denying himself the ease of the Pack B, trying, as he walked, to anticipate Larner's next strategem, to plan for it, to nullify it.

VIII

MIGUEL LARNER sat on the apron of his diorama pool, dangling his legs in the water. The Stage Three who was to be his eventual replacement lounged in a chair nearby. His name was Martin Merman and he was a bland-faced young man who, in prior life, had been an exceptionally successful guerilla leader. His very successes had brought him to the attention of one of Miguel's predecessors.

The two men had a warm relationship, based primarily on the essential loneliness of all Stage Threes. Miguel made a point of keeping Martin Merman well versed on all current operations. Not only did it train Merman, but he often came up with quite acceptable alterations in established programs. Para-voice between them was reserved for those situations when speed of communication was essential. When there was no pressure they preferred the leisure of actual conversation.

"The Branson operation has been one of the subtler ones," Miguel said. "We couldn't handle it openly because of the possibility of interference by Shard. That's why I stepped in over a year ago and steered Enfield and Barson into handling it as a secret mission. Looked like a better chance of getting it all wound up before Shard realized it."

"How did he get onto it? Do you know?"

"When he blocked the assassination of George Fahdi, and I still insist it wasn't your fault it didn't work, he left an agent close to Smith, unfortunately a Stage Two who caught in Smith's mind the details of the pending trip to see Branson. They found they couldn't control Branson properly. That's when they made the substitution. Lorin could still snatch our fat from the fire. They tried to block him with illusions. We lost him and picked him up again at the hospital and Karen brought him here. I can get his account of the conferences published. Fahdi is the trouble point. World indignation might be just enough to tip him over."

"Won't Shard's people be hunting for this Lorin?"

"Obviously, but I suspect they know he's here where they can't touch him."

"What are you going to do then, Miguel?"

"He's finished the article. Damn good, too. As soon as I place it, I'm going to turn him loose."

"And let Shard's people pick him up and force a repudiation?"

"Exactly."

"Then what's the point of the whole thing? What is gained?"

"It's a feint, Martin. The real target is Smith."

Merman frowned and then grinned. "I see what you mean. Let Smith see his opportunity. Let him give George Fahdi a false account of the talk with Branson, now that Branson is dead, and then use his own knowledge of the sub-rosa deal to ride into power and . . . "

"He has already given Fahdi the false account. He was quick to see the advantage after a little . . . gentle suggestion. Too bad he's a psychopathic personality. Be good material otherwise. Tough enough. Ambitious enough. Keep Shard concentrating on Lorin and maybe Fahdi can go the way of most dictators. If he's tipped over, that will put the fear of God into Stephen Chu and Garva for a time. Will of the people. All that sort of thing."

"So this Lorin becomes your stalking horse."

"Which won't please the fair Karen. Bit of an emotional set there."

"Really? It does happen sometimes. I remember a girl, back when I was a Stage Two. Talked myself into believing she could make it. Cracked up in no time at all."

"Lorin has some good latent abilities. But he won't survive Shard's gentle attentions. He's already had just about as much as he could take. There was a flaw in the substitution and he noticed it. And he can't quite bring himself to look squarely at all the inferences."

"Fahdi is prime target?"

"Like Hitler, back when I was a Stage One, Martin. That was a wild and merry chase. The Stage Three in charge arranged three assassination attempts, and each one was blocked, barely in time. Good Lord, that was nearly thirty years ago."

"When you were nearly three years younger, Miguel?" Martin Merman asked gently.

"When you are a Stage One you believe in too many things. Fahdi is prime. I have three people building up the student revolt in the Argentine, several lobbying on the trade agreements at New Delhi, one teaching Garva some new and more destructive pleasures of the flesh. Those are top order. Except for this Branson thing, Shard seems to depend on those old trustworthy 'border incidents.' They're effective, but only in a limited way. Stability, unity, must come from within. That's why I've assigned so many of our people to the routine job of agricultural research—helping the actual researchers see old things in a new way. But I have a hedge against defeat, too."

"That's a nice trick if you can manage it."

"Back to the oldest continent, Martin. Back to the newest power rising in the heart of Africa in another forty, fifty years. We're stirring them up there. Making them think. Making them come alive. Like all the years of labor in India."

Martin frowned. "What would happen, Miguel, if . . . one side or the other achieved a victory so sweeping that . . . there was no turning back."

"You mean if the pot boiled over? It won't. It can't."

THE soda hissed into the glass as Miguel made a drink for Dake Lorin. He handed the tall man the glass.

"Drink a toast to yourself, Dake. You get it on the front page of the Times-Trib. Bylined. Wire services all over the world."

Dake stared at him. "They wouldn't touch it when I took it to them."

"You couldn't tell them those Disservice people wouldn't raise a stink. I can. Old friends I got down there. Here's your money back. Didn't need it."

"What's your object in helping me, Mr. Larner."

Miguel shrugged his thick shoulders. "The way I work. I do you a favor. You do me a favor. That makes the world go around. Got any plans?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd see if I can't get back into the same sort of thing I was doing working for Darwin Branson. I want to see if I can get an appointment with Enfield."

"Want me to fix that?"

Dake smiled. "I guess you could, all right. I guess there isn't much you can't do. But I think I better try this on my own."

"He isn't going to be too happy when that paper hits the streets. And that ought to be in . . . about two hours."

"Think the article will do any good, Mr. Larner?"

"That kind of thing is over my head, Dake. I stick to my own line. Prono, and supplying the fleng joints, and the tridi franchises. So long as I can keep making a fast rupee, I should sweat up the world? I should live so long? Nice having you around, Dake. Let me know how you make out."

"You sound like a friend of mine. She has the same approximate philosophy. She calls me a do-gooder. Patrice Togelson."

"I know about her. She and me, we'd make a good team. Bring her around some time."

"She thinks she's a team all by herself. I've got to take this money back to her. She loaned it to me. To make a damn fool of myself with."

"Good luck, boy. Don't take any wooden rupees."

Dake went up and picked up his suitcase, went the rest of the way up to the lobby. He nodded at Johnny, the desk clerk, told him he was leaving for good. As he turned toward the door he heard his name called.

He turned. Karen was running toward him from the elevators. Her eyes were wide with alarm. "You're not going?"

"Yes, I am. And thanks for everything."

"But you haven't seen Miguel! He doesn't know you're going."

"I just said goodby to him, Karen."

She half turned away from him. There was an odd expression on her face, as though she were listening for a sound that was just

beyond his hearing range. Her face changed then, screwed up like the face of a child about to cry.

"Goodby, Dake." She held her hand out. He took it.

"Goodby, Karen."

When he was outside the door he glanced back. She stood inside, watching him through the glass. She was not standing in the casual, slumped, hoyden posture of Karen Voss. She stood slim and straight, with a sort of forlorn dignity on her face. He walked to the corner, turning once to wave. She did not respond. A charcoal-burning cab picked him up and clattered its desolate way toward the CIJ terminal. He had a twenty minute wait for the next Philadelphia shuttle jet. The newspapers arrived barely in time. He bought two copies and took them onto the aircraft with him. Aside from two typos, the article was exactly as he had written it. And they had bannered it SECRET DEALS REVEALED, with the sub-head, BRANSON'S DEPUTY IN FOUR POWER AGREEMENT CLAIMS IRANIAN DOUBLE-CROSS SHAPING UP.

The coin was up in the air, he thought. It could land heads or tails. Heads would be a new agreement, a lessening of international tension. Tails would merely quicken the war which more than half the world now called "inevitable."

He read it through twice, quickly, and then glanced at the rest of the news. Massacre in a religious encampment in Iowa. Fire razes abandoned plant of Youngstown Sheet and Tube. Gurkha Airforce takes long term lease on Drew Field in Florida, in conjunction with the missile launching stations at Cocoa. Maharani kidnap attempt foiled. Skyrocketing murder statistics blamed on prono addiction, yet growers' lobby thwarts legislative control. Bigamy legalized in California after Supreme Court review. Tridi starlet found dead in bed. New North China conscription planned. Brazil develops deadly virus mutation. New soil deficiency isolated at Kansas lab. Texas again threatens secession. Enfield Key Westing.

Dake frowned as he read the last item. With the publication of his article, he would be poison to anyone except Enfield himself, and perhaps with him too, but at least it was a chance. There were a few more minutes of the flight left. During the last two days he had come to avoid all introspective moments, to busy his mind with activity—any kind of activity,—just so it kept him from thinking.

Stream of thought was like a swift river that ran smoothly down a channel and then broke suddenly against a rock. That rock was the flaw he had seen in Branson, and the manner of his "death." After striking the rock, the current boiled into an eddy, circling aimlessly. A thousand times he had tried to dismiss it by telling himself that he was mistaken. Auto-hypnosis. A tiny flaw in the mind, a wrinkle resulting from strain. For the first time in many days he thought consciously of his wife. The dull feeling of loss lingered always in his subconscious, ready to be brought to the surface. A warm, quiet, bright-eyed girl who had loved him. There had been for a long time an inability to believe that she was dead. He would meet her around the next corner. Maybe the strain had started when he had at last faced the fact that she was utterly and incredibly gone. Wife and father —both, somehow, killed by different aspects of the same thing. Father killed by a small corruption, and wife by a vaster one—yet the difference was only in degree.

These, he thought, were poor years for a constructive idealist. The dream was always the same. Do a little bit, to the limit of your strength, and it will become a better world, after you have gone. If each man does a little bit. . . . Maybe, back in the eighteen hundreds that dream had a little validity. Men could believe, back there, that the world became a little bit better each year. But then, following the first two world wars, the dream had somehow become reversed. Men of good will began to believe that the world was getting worse. Thought became nihilistic, or existentialistic. Praise the gods of nothingness.

Yet somehow there had been more vitality in thinking the world was getting worse than in the tepid philosophizings of the middle sixties when it was believed that the world never gets better or worse—it remains always on an even keel of disorder, Christ played off against Dachau, with the game always ending in a draw. A bad time

for functional idealism. Patrice and Miguel were the inevitable products of the culture. Let me get mine—fast.

How much simpler to fall into their way of life. The devil take my grandchildren. Corruption is always with us. The game always ends in a draw, and all the efforts of one man cannot effect that immutable decision.

Patrice provided the easy doorway. She had always urged him to come in with her. "There are so many things you could do, darling. I need some one to handle public relations, to deal with some of my compadres who seem to resent dealing with a woman. Some of the Indians look at me as though they thought I should be in purdha. I could pay you well, but it wouldn't be charity or a gift or anything, because I *do* need you."

Not quite yet, Patrice. Not until I can recognize the inevitability of defeat. And maybe I'll never recognize that.

AS THE aircraft dipped over Philadelphia he saw that there had been another one of the power failures which seemed to become more frequent each year. Angular sections of the city were blacked out. Nobody screamed with outraged indignation any more. With enough technicians, money and standby equipment, there would be no power failures. But Philadelphia, as all other cities, lacked all three factors. Standard correctional procedure was to appoint a committee to look into the findings of the committee which had been appointed to make a survey. The answer was always the same. We lack oil and coal and ore and copper and zinc and tin and timber and men.

He caught a cab, had to transfer to another when the first one broke down. He felt uneasy riding through the dark streets with the money in his wallet. Philadelphia was infested with child gangs. The dissolution and decay of the school system had put them on the streets. They had the utter, unthinking ruthlessness of children in all ages. The guerilla days had filled the land with weapons.

He got out of the cab in front of Patrice's house, saw the lights and felt secure again. The cab drove away as he started up the walk. The faint movement of a shadow among shadows startled him. He saw it from the corner of his eye. He turned quickly, saw nothing. He waited for a few moments and then turned toward the house. The pretty Japanese maid opened the door and gave him her usual welcoming smile, glinting with gold.

"Good evening, Mr. Lor . . ."

He had stepped into the hall. She stared at him and her face changed, grotesquely. She put one hand to her throat. She took a step backward and her eyes bulged in a glassy way as though, at last, after years of nightmare, she now faced the ultimate horror.

"What's wrong with you?"

She took another step and suddenly crumpled, to lie still on the hall rug. He leaned over her. Patrice came out into the hall.

"Dake! What on earth happened to Molly?"

"I don't know. She just stared at me and looked horrified and fainted. I guess it's a faint."

Patrice knelt by the small frail figure, began to rub her wrist, pat her wan cheek. "Molly! Molly dear!"

She frowned and then glanced up at Dake. "I don't know what. . . ." She stopped and stared at him intently, and her face suddenly looked like chalk. "God," she whispered softly. "God!" She shut her eyes tightly, squinching up her face. She swayed on her knees as though she would topple over the figure of the maid.

"What's wrong!" Dake demanded. "What is it?"

She kept her eyes shut. "I don't want to . . . look. It's . . . your face."

Dake instinctively lifted his hand to touch his face. He rubbed his left cheek with his right hand. It felt completely normal. He ran his hand across his mouth and suddenly stopped, his heart thudding. He gingerly touched his right cheek, his fingertips making a whispering sound against the hard polished bone. He slid his fingertips up to touch the empty ivory eye-socket.

He reached the big hall mirror in three strides and stared at himself. Had a polished skull-head stared back at him it would not have been anywhere near as horrible as to see the face evenly divided between

life and death. One side flushed, warm, alive. On the other side the naked truth.

Impossibility!

Face to face with all the myriad logical answers. None of them logical. Take half a man's face off and he bleeds to death. He looked into the mirror and saw, behind him, the reflected image of Patrice, her face in her hands, kneeling beside the still form of Molly—the little maid who had been so proud of learning the letter L that she had changed her name.

He saw a cliff in the back of his mind, and sanity clung, scrabbling with bleeding fingers, to the sheer edge. Easier to drop into nothingness, turning over and over through the endless fall. Easier to scream and giggle and destroy the two women with murderous fear.

He walked slowly to a position behind Patrice, looked down on her shining head.

His voice sounded rusty. "Would you ever try to tell anyone about this?"

"No. No!"

"Then how many others have seen things . . . like this, and knew they dared not speak of them, Patrice?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Are we dreaming this? Is it happening? Are you the Patrice of my dreams?"

"You're . . . in my dream, Dake. In my nightmare."

"How do we go about waking up?"

"You know we're awake," she whispered. "What . . . are you?"

"A beastie? A demon? I'm Dake. I don't understand it any better than you do. Look at me."

"No."

He took the shining hair in his fist and wrenched her head back. "Look at me!" She moaned, but kept her eyes tight shut. With his free hand he thumbed back her eyelid, even as she clawed at his wrist. She did not move or breathe. The wide eye stared at him. She screamed then. A scream that tore his nerves. That final utter scream of the last panic. She jumped up and spun away, staring at him, still screaming, pausing only to fill her lungs and scream again. And stopped. And stood in the echoing silence and began to laugh, bending and twisting and holding herself with laughter, running then, doubling over with laughter, running against the door and rebounding to run again and at last tearing it open, running out into the night, laughing, tripping, falling, laying there in the diagonal of light from the open door, her legs still making spasmodic running motions, her laughter sounding as though her throat were slowly filling with blood. . . .

HE UNDERSTOOD. Her bold proud mind had been full of arrogance, of certainty, of knowledge of infallibility. Faced with the hideous and inexplicable, the mind had been unable to bend, unable to accept impossibility. And so, under strain, it had broken clearly, cleanly. Her example oddly gave him an understanding how close he was to the same fracture line, gave him that necessary increment of pliability that kept him from breaking.

He knew that they would bring her back, quickly perhaps, to a relative sanity. But that new sanity would be a weak patch on the broken mind. She would walk in uncertainty, with the morbid expectation that around the very next corner she might find . . . a new inexplicable horror.

Molly, the Japanese maid, was a different case. Here was no proud and rigid mind, dependent on an explicable world. Here was a willingness to accept the unknown on its own terms. It would give her bad night dreams.

It would give her delicious chills from time to time. But she would not break through the necessity of having to find a reason for something that was without reason.

They came, the obsequious and silken little doctors of the very rich, murmuring their concern, manicured fingers timing the flutter of pulse, honing in subdued voices for the very best of hospital suites, the most accomplished of private nurses, and making the deft quieting injections, cautioning the attendants who levered the still Viking body into the chrome and gold of the huge Taj ambulance for the hushed flight through the night streets of the city.

One doctor rode with the sleeping woman, and the other, with many nervous glances at his watch, questioned Dake and Molly. Dake had known from the vaguely irritable glances the doctors had given him that his face was

no longer horror. He had furtively fingered his cheek to make certain.

Molly sat in a straight chair, her fists propped rigid atop her thighs, her ankles neatly together, the black hair drawn back tightly, sheening oiled blue and green in the lamp light. Her eyes would flick toward Dake, slide uneasily away.

"It seems," the doctor said, "to be a form of hysteria. It may help the diagnosis, Mr. Lorin, if you would tell me the apparent cause."

"I was only here a few moments before it happened, Doctor. I flew down from New York this evening, and taxied out here."

"When you first saw her did she seem upset in any way?"

Dake was laughing inwardly. It was unpleasant laughter. Try to tell this neat fussy little man the truth and he would have you wrapped up and labeled for delivery to the state institution, despite the shortage of beds and treatment for the insane.

"She did not seem upset," Dake said. "It seemed to happen quickly."

The doctor turned to Molly. "Has she been herself lately?"

"Yes sir." Soft voice that trembled.

He looked at the maid and knew she would say nothing. The doctor sighed and looked at his watch again. "You aren't much help, either of you. Miss Togelson has always impressed me as a very strong personality. This is rather . . . shocking, from a personal point of view. Neither of you know what she meant with all that babbling about skulls?"

Dake saw the maid shudder. He said, "Sorry, No."

"I'll be off then."

"Could you give me a lift, Doctor, if you're heading downtown?"

"Come along."

As they went onto the porch Dake heard the maid slide the locks on the big door. As they got into the car he saw the lights coming on in room after room. Molly would want a lot of light around her. She would want the night to be like day.

The doctor drove with reckless casual impatience. "Where are you going, Mr. Lorin?"

"I checked luggage at the CIJ downtown terminal."

"I'll drop you at the door."

"Can I phone you tomorrow to find out about Miss Togelson?"

"In the afternoon."

IX

DAKE took his luggage to a nearby hotel, registered, had a late supper and went up to his room. He was unpacking his toilet articles when the bellhop arrived with the typewriter.

"It doesn't look like much, sir, but the assistant manager says it's in good shape." He carried it over to the desk by the window and set it down.

"I didn't order a typewriter sent up."

The bellhop was a chinless young man with the air of resolute efficiency of a beaver. He gave Dake an uneasy smile. "I suppose that's some kind of a joke, Mr. Lorin. I guess I don't get it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I was in here ten minutes ago when you sent for a boy, and you told me you wanted a typewriter. I mean, if it's a gag, I don't get it."

Before the episode with Patrice, Dake knew he would have objected strenuously. He would have phoned the manager and asked if this was a new method of gouging the guests. He would have demanded that the typewriter be taken away.

But the world was altering in some obscure way. A very brazen little wench had talked imaginatively of the delusion of reality. Half a death's head in a mirror. A woman mad from fright. A fingernail. Fundamentally he was a man of curiosity. A reporter. He could not ignore the objective questions which he asked of subjective experience.

He tipped the boy. "Not a very good joke, I guess."

The boy relaxed. "Thanks, sir. You had me worried there for a minute. I wondered if I was going nuts. Good night, sir."

The boy closed the door after him. Dake stood in the middle of the room, rubbing his chin with his knuckles. This, like every other damnable thing that had happened, had two aspects. The other side of the coin was that he *had* requested a typewriter. Insanity. Delusion. But Molly and Patrice had

seen something. Could that be objective proof? Only, he thought, if he could prove to himself that he had gone to her house and what he imagined had happened had actually happened. He went quickly to the phone. It took twenty minutes to get the hospital. Phone service had changed over the years from a convenience to an annoying irritant.

The girl at the hospital switchboard answered at last.

"Do you have a patient there, recently admitted? A Miss Patrice Togelson?"

"Just a moment, sir. I'll check."

He waited. She came back on the line and said, "Yes sir. She was admitted about three hours ago. She is resting comfortably, sir."

"Thank you."

He hung up, sat on the edge of the bed, lit a cigarette. All right. Take it another step. How do I prove I made that call, and prove I talked to the girl at the hospital switchboard? The call will appear on my bill.

Yet, when I see it noted on the bill, how do I know I am actually seeing it?

There was a stabbing pain centered behind his eyes, a pain so sudden and intense that it blinded him. He closed his eyes and opened them again, aware of an abrupt transition, aware that time had passed. Instead of being seated on the bed, he was seated in front of the desk. A dingy sheet of hotel stationery was rolled into the typewriter. Several lines had been typed.

Dake read them mechanically. "To whom it may concern: When Darwin Branson died I saw that I could use his death to my own advantage. I saw a way I could put myself back in the public eye. I had worked for Darwin Branson for a full year, but his assigned task had been to make a detailed survey of State Department policy decisions. He was not engaged in any way in secret negotiations.

"The article I wrote for the Times-Tribune was a ruse. No such agreements were made. I had the plan of writing the article in order to help promote world unity. I realize now that it was a delusion of grandeur. I realize now that the article will have the reverse effect from what I had planned. I feel that at the time I wrote the article I was not responsible for my actions.

"The only way I can make amends is to write this full confession and then proceed to. . . ."

It stopped there. The sudden time transition seemed to leave him numbed, unable to comprehend. The words seemed meaningless. He moved his lips as he read it again, much like a child trying to comprehend an obscure lesson in a textbook.

"No!" he said thickly.

The pain again focused behind his eyes, but not as intensely as before. It was almost as though it were coming to him through some shielding substance. It made his vision swim, but it did not black him out entirely. There was a pulsating quality to it, a strength that increased and diminished, as though in conflict.

He tried to keep his hands at his sides, but they lifted irresistibly to the keys of the typewriter. A new word. ". . . take . . ."

He held his hands rigid. Sweat ran down the side of his throat. Two hard clacks as his fingers hit the keys. ". . . my . . ."

The feeling of combat in his mind, of entities battling for control, was sharp and clear. He did not feel that he was fighting with any strength. He was something limp, helpless, being pushed and pulled at the same time.

". . . own . . ."

His hands spasmed, the knuckles crackling.

". . . life."

AND again, without temporal hiatus, his pen was in his hand, his signature already scrawled at the foot of the sheet, the sheet out of the typewriter. Blackout, and he was at the window, one long leg over the sill, the window flung high, sharp October night breathing against his face, an enclosed court far below, a few lighted windows across from him, like watchful eyes.

Conflict crescendoed in his mind and was suddenly gone. Emptiness. He straddled the sill, motionless. No more pushing and pulling. Easy now to let go. Easier than trying to find answers to problems. Easier than fighting insanity. Let go and spin slowly down through the whispering night, down by the lighted windows, down to that final

answer. He heard himself make a sniggling sound, a drunken giggle. He sensed the impending rupture of his brain. A bursting of tissues. His hand tightened on the sill. Come now, God of darkness. Take your tired child. Find the dark land father, hanging in the stone cell of eternity, turning slowly with blackened face. Find the wife who one instant was warmth, and now lives forever in the heart of the whiteness hotter than the sun.

But . . . WHY?

Drop the question unanswered? Fall to the smash of bone on stone and never know why?

His mind wheeled for one insane instant and focused on WHY. Big letters, the color of flame, written on the black night. Never knowing was more horrid than continuing the conflict, the distortion of reality.

He released his hold and fell into the room, fell with a slack muscled helplessness, his head thudding on the rug. He lay on his back and grasped his hard thighs with long-fingered hands, sensing the fibrous nerves, meaty tissues, churn of blood. He tasted his aliveness with his hands, content not to think for a little while. The dusty drapery flapped slowly in the night wind. The wind cooled the sweat on his face. He heard the far-away city sound.

Dake sat up slowly, feeling as though hallucination had drained his strength. He hitched closer to the window, wanting to close it. The sash was out of his reach, yet he did not quite dare stand to reach it. He hitched over, stood up, leaning against the wall. He reached one hand over, blindly, slid the sash down with a shattering bang. He turned his heavy shoulders against the wall.

In front of him was an evanescence, the faintest silvery shimmer. It was much like that first warning flicker of migraine, dread shining blindness.

And Karen Voss stood there, brown hair tousled, thumb tucked pertly in the wide belt, lumid gray eyes full of pale concern and sassy arrogance. He drew his lips back flat against his teeth and made a small sick sound in his throat and tried to reassure himself by passing his hard arm through the vision. His wrist struck the warm roundness of her shoulder, staggering her.

"Don't try to explain things to yourself," she said quickly. Her voice was tense. "Got to get you out of here." She stepped quickly to the desk, snatched up the typed confession, ripped it quickly. She looked over her shoulder at him. "I hate to think of how many credits I'm losing. Start drooling and babbling and prove I'm wrong."

Dake straightened his shoulders. "Go straight to hell," he said thickly.

She studied him for a moment, head tilted to one side. She took his wrist, warm fingers tightening, pulling him toward the door. "I remember how you must feel. I'll break some more rules, now that I've started. You're expected to go mad, my friend. Just keep remembering that. And don't."

At the door she paused. "Now do exactly as I say. Without question. I kept you from going out that window."

"What do you want?"

"We're going to try to get out of here. The competition is temporarily . . . kaput. If we get separated, go to Miguel. You understand? As quickly as you can."

He felt her tenseness as they went down the seemingly endless flights of stairs to the lobby, went out into the night. "Now walk fast," she said.

Down the block, around the corner, over to Market. She pulled him into a dark shallow doorway.

"What are we . . ."

"Be still." She stood very quietly. In the faint light of a distant street lamp he could see that her eyes were half shut.

Suddenly she sighed. "The competition is no longer kaput, Dake. They've got an idea of direction."

An ancient car meandered down the potholed street, springs banging, engine making panting sounds. It swerved suddenly and came over to the curb and stopped. A gaunt, raw-looking man stepped out, moving like a puppet with an amateur handling the strings. He went off down the sidewalk, lifting his feet high with each step.

"Get in and drive it," Karen said, pushing impatiently at him. He cramped his long legs under the wheel. She got in beside him. He drove down the street, hearing behind them the frantic yawp of the dispossessed driver.

She called the turns. They entered an area

of power failure, as dark as a ruined and abandoned city.

"Stop here and we'll leave the car," she said.

They walked down the dark street. She stepped into an almost invisible alley mouth. "Wait," she said.

Once again she was still. He heard her long sigh. "Nothing in range, Dake. Come on. North Seventh is a couple of blocks over. Bright lights. Crowds. That's the best place."

"It's a bad place to go. For a couple."

"We're safe, Dake."

"What did you do to that man in the car?"

She didn't answer. Her high heels clacked busily in double time to his long stride. They came to street lights again. Brown hair bounced against the nape of her neck as she walked.

"What did you people do to Branson?"

Again she refused to answer.

"If you *are* people," he said with surly emphasis. "I don't care about your . . . motivations. I won't forgive what was done to Patrice."

"Please shut up. Stop grumbling."

Two men appeared suddenly out of the shadows, a dozen paces ahead. Dake stopped at once, turned and glanced quickly behind them, saw the others there, heard the odd whinnying giggle of a mind steeped in prono, anticipating the sadist fury. Karen had kept on walking. He caught her in two strides, hand yanking on her shoulder.

SHE spun out his grasp. He gasped and stared at the two men. They had turned into absurd dolls, leaping stiff-legged in grotesque dance, bellowing in fright and pain. One rebounded off the front of a building, caught crazy balance and rebounded again. The other pitched headlong into the gutter and rolled onto his back and began banging his heels against the pavement, arching his back. Dake could think of nothing but insects which had blundered into a cone of light which had blinded them, bewildered them, driven them frantic with heat and pain. Behind them the other men bounded and bucked and sprawled. Karen did not change her pace. He caught up with her. She gave him a sidelong gamin grin, a quick flicker of ribald humor in the faint slant of street lights.

"Dance of the pronies," she said.

"And there is no point, I suppose, in asking you . . what did that."

"Why not? A headache. A rather severe one. It gave them something to think about. Like this."

He staggered and clamped his palm hard over the lance of pure flame that ran from temple to temple, a rivulet of fire. It stopped his breath for a moment. And it was gone as quickly as it had come. There was no lingering pain. But the memory of pain was almost as hurtful as the pain itself.

She took his hand. "You'd be much more difficult, Dake. Prono makes mush of them. Soft, sticky little brains. Like wet glue. We'll go down there to that place. A breathing spell. I've got to think how I can get us back to New York."

The fleng joint was a slow seething cauldron of mass desperation. Prono and fice and fleng strip routines, and the gut-roil of the kimba music, and the rubbery walls like white wet flesh. During the Great Plague in London, mankind, obsessed by dissolution, had made an earnest attempt to rejoin the slime from which he had once come. Now the plague was of the spirit, and the effect was the same. They pushed their way through to a lounging table, and waved away the house clowns, refused a cubicle ticket, managed to order native whiskey. She put her lips, with their heavy makeup, close to his ear.

"We're going to separate here, Dake. That will be the best way. I could try to help you get to Miguel, but they can find me easier than they can you. I'll be more harm than help."

"And if I don't want to get to Miguel?"

"Don't be such a fool. It isn't a case of wanting. If you don't get there, you'll die. Maybe you want to do that. If you want to die, then I'm wrong about you."

He turned toward her and saw the sudden panic change her face. Though her lips did not move, and he was certain she had not spoken, her words were clear in his mind, coming with a rapidity that speech could not have duplicated.

"I didn't do as well as I thought: A Stage Three picked us up. Coming in the

door over there. The man with the long red hair. I'm going to distract him. Leave as quickly as you can and don't pay any attention to anything. Understand. Anything! No matter how crazy it looks to you. Go to Miguel as quickly as you can and . . . be careful when you get there. You'll be safe once you're in the lobby. But the street out in front will be dangerous. Be very careful. Go now. Hurry!"

He slid from the table and plunged toward the door. A small man with a wooden look on his face hopped up onto one of the show platforms and dived at the sick-looking man with the long red hair. A woman screeched and raced at the red-haired man. Dake felt a surge of terror so strong that he knew, somehow, that it had been induced in his brain by Karen to give him more speed, more energy.

The red-haired man was twisting in a knot of people who oddly fell away from him, as though all interest in him were suddenly lost. Dake burst through the door and found himself running with others. Running with a pack of others. And he saw that they were all himself. He saw a dozen Dake Lorins bursting from the door, running in all directions, and he screamed as he ran, screamed and looked back over his shoulder as he screamed, saw the red-haired one stand on the sidewalk and then topple as someone dived against his legs. He ran silently then, lifting his long legs, running until white pain burned his side and scorched his lungs. He slowed and walked, struggling for breath, his knees fluttering, sweat cold on his body.

The cab driver was reluctant. He said he didn't make trips like that. He yielded to two arguments—Dake's strangling arm across his throat, and the thousand rupee note in front of his eyes. Dake took the man's gun and shoved it inside his belt. Dawn wasn't far away as they turned into the only tunnel to Manhattan that had not become flooded and unusable due to neglect. In the city the white police trucks were collecting the bodies of those who had died violently in the night. Dake felt caked and dry and old, worn dry with emotional hangover. They went through the dark streets in those pre-dawn hours when life is at its lowest ebb—the hours of aimless regrets, of the sense of waste, of the knowledge of death. The October stars wheeled in their corrosive indifference to all the works of man. The city slept . . . restlessly.

X

MINDFUL of Karen's last warning, he had the driver stop two blocks from the above-ground lobby of the apartment dwelling where Miguel lived. He gave the man the thousand rupee note, returned his gun. The man gave him a surly nod, made a screeching U turn, reckless of his precious tires, drove back downtown, single red eye blinking as the rough road surface joggled a loose connection.

Dake moved with instinctive animal caution, staying on the darker side of the street, stepping lightly and quickly through patches of faint radiance. The above-ground lobby was lighted. He could see the head of the desk clerk bent over a book on the high desk. The soft light of the lobby made a semicircle of radiance that reached almost to the midpoint of the road.

Dake waited for a time in the shadows, oddly restless, and then walked out boldly, heading directly across the street for the doors. His heels were loud on the asphalt. He heard a faint scuffing noise in the shadows behind him and to his left. He did not turn, but lengthened his stride. The area of light was two steps away. He took another long stride and was caught there, motionless. Something had clamped down on volition, something that held him as though, in an instant, he had been turned to ice, or stone. He could not change even the direction of his sight. The clerk was just off his center of vision. He saw the head lift abruptly. He moved then, taking a long step backward with infinite unwilled stealth. Another step.

Miguel Larner appeared suddenly, just inside the doors. Dake had not seen where he had come from, or how. The man wore a pair of florid pajamas. He stood very still. A stranger appeared behind him, another beside him, and a tall woman appeared over near the desk. The five persons inside the bright lobby stood and watched him. They were fifty feet away. He could see no expression on their faces, but their eyes

seemed bright, feral. He was aware of how alien they were. They seemed to emanate a tangible coldness.

Something behind him was frightened. He could taste fright that nibbled at the edges of his mind. A hard compression of force erupted into his brain. It sucked him forward, running with a vast awkwardness, a shamble-legged, slack-armed lunge that took him stumbling across the sidewalk, diving for the doors that flicked open barely in time, to let him slide and roll on the slick floor, to thud against the base of the desk as the woman stepped lightly out of the way. He sat up. They had all moved closer to the door. They filed out and stood in a row on the sidewalk. On the far side of the street something flounced and rolled and made gutteral sounds in the darkness. They all came back in. Miguel Larner came over to Dake. His eyes were vast and hung in pure velvet blackness, unsupported. There was nothing else in the world but the eyes of Miguel Larner. Little fingers pried under the edge of Dake's soul and flipped him. He fell off the edge into blackness.

It was a cloudless spring morning by Miguel's dioramic pool. Dake shut his eyes again. He remembered a time long ago. Eight years old. He had seen the overhead lights of the operating room. Then heard a hollow echoing voice in his head, saying, as though in a long tunnel, "mmmm-*gas!* mmmm-*gas!* mmmmm-*GAS!*"

And then the bleary awakening—the over-large faces of his parents looking down at him on the bed—big faces suspended at odd angles. "How do you feel?" A voice that echoed down a long empty tunnel.

He opened his eyes again. He was on a gay beach chair by the pool. Miguel and a stranger looked at him with that cold sobriety, that extra-human speculation he had seen in the lobby—how long ago? A year, or a minute.

Miguel's lips moved. "Mr. Lorin. Mr. Merman."

"How do you do." Dake wanted to let loose crazy laughter at the quaintness of the formality. He trapped the laughter in his throat.

Merman had a boy's face, an old man's eyes.

"You did well," Miguel said, "to get in range of Johnny. Otherwise Karen's rather pathetic little exhibition of stubbornness would have been quite pointless. They've brought her in. She wants to see you. I'll call her. Don't speak to her."

No answer seemed necessary. Miguel gave Merman a quick sharp look and nodded. Dake had the idea they were communicating with each other. Karen came out to the pool, stood on the apron at the far side of the pool and looked at Dake. He was shocked at the change in her. Her face was wan and pinched, and her eyes were enormous. Her mouth had a trembling, old-lady uncertainty about it, and her fingers plucked at the edges of her grubby skirt. Two things seemed mingled inextricably in her eyes. A keen, warm, personal interest in him, and also a look of confused dullness—the look sometimes seen in the eyes of a dog beaten once too often.

Miguel nodded at her and she turned and left, walking aimlessly, shaking her head, saying something to herself that Dake could not understand.

"What happened to her?" Dake asked.

"I'll tell you, but just remember it, don't try to understand it. Later . . . if you are more than I think you are, understanding will catch up with you. Remember this. Two screens badly torn. The third screen bruised. She'll be a long time healing, relearning, re-adjusting. She'll be a long time here, Dake Lorin."

"What is this all about?" Dake asked. He had a sense of futility as he asked the question. Miguel Larner went over to the pool, sat and dangled his legs in the water, his broad bare brown back toward Dake. Dake looked toward the young-old face of Merman. His eyes veered suddenly toward something that had moved on the stones of the terrace. A tiny column of little naked savage figures snake-danced their way toward his ankles. Four-inch figures with animal faces. Their tiny cries were like the cries of insects. He instinctively snatched his feet up into the chair. They swarmed up the chair legs.

THE memory of Karen's voice came to him across present horror. "You're expected to go mad, my friend. Just keep remembering that. And don't."

He shut his eyes and slowly lowered his feet to the floor. He felt them running across his clothing, plucking at him, prodding, pinching. They clambered up his chest, up his face, entangled tiny fists in his hair and swung themselves up. He opened his eyes and he was in utter blackness. He was naked. A long cold something coiled its way slowly across his foot. He set his teeth in his lower lip and did not cry out, nor move. He fell to hot bright yellow sand. Fat spiders skittered across the sand. He looked more closely and saw that they were dismembered human hands, standing tall and agile on plump fingers, circling him with quick darts of movement. Two of them struggled toward him, dragging something, dragging, he saw, Karen's head, the spider fingers scrubbing in the sand with the effort. A shadow crossed him. He turned and looked up, squinting at a featureless sky. Something hung there. A figure so huge that it reduced him to the size of an insect. A rope encircled its neck, extending out of sight into the sky. The huge figure turned slowly. He looked up into the purpling bloated face of his father. He turned, ready to run whooping through all the yellow sand of eternity, ready to run with bulged eyes until blood burst his throat. He dropped to his knees on the sand. He covered his eyes. He clearly felt the ancient brain scar, felt it swell and tear slightly and then knit itself, fiber clasping fiber, compacting into strength. He stood up and turned and looked calmly up at the vast naked face. Spiders scuttled off into the sand waste. Coils moved off into darkness. The bitter little insect squeakings faded into an utter silence.

Miguel's bare brown back appeared and the sand faded around it, faded into terrace and pool and the still spring morning of the diorama.

Miguel turned and looked at him over the brown shoulder, smiled. "It seems I must be proved wrong occasionally."

"I'll never break," Dake said, not knowing why he had selected those words.

"Merman will show you the way."

He followed Merman. The rock slid aside. The glowing tunnel shafted down through bed rock. Three cubes of a fatty gray that was no color at all stood in a rough cavern hollowed out of the rock. The radiance in the cavern had an almost radioactive look.

Merman turned to Dake. The boyish lips did not move. "You are going to a place where you will be trained. You will accept training eagerly, because you want to turn it against us. That is to be expected. You wonder what we are. You will not learn that until you are skilled."

An orifice slit opened in the side of one of the ten foot cubes. He edged through the opening. The cube, except for a small triple row of studs near the opening, was featureless. Merman reached through the opening, touched a stud, stepped back quickly. The slit closed. Light came through the cube walls. He looked at Merman as though looking through water. Long ago, in his mother's kitchen, he had delighted in using an object called an egg slicer. Place a hardboiled egg in the cupped place, and pull the handle down slowly. Tiny wires sliced through the egg.

This was like that egg slicer, and it happened in the space of a tenth of a heartbeat. A billion wires. Each one sliced neatly through his body. The pain Karen had given him was, by comparison, a tiny pinch, a nip of the flesh.

And the pain was gone, the slit open. His one desire was to get out of that cube as quickly as humanly possible. He caught in the yielding slit for a moment, and then tumbled free, thinking he was on the floor of the cavern. A sky of such a pallid blue as to be almost white burned overhead, deepening in color toward the horizons. He was on hands and knees on a featureless metallic plain. Around him was a matrix of the gray cubes arranged in painfully perfect geometric design, all joined by gleaming metal tubes. His cube was joined to its neighbors, as were the others. He stood up, and his feet left the metallic surface in an awkward little jump. Here and there cubes were missing from the pattern, leaving the tube ends raw and naked. It was oddly disturbing to see the design incomplete, as though looking at a lovely woman with several front teeth missing.

Low against the horizon off to his right two small moons hung clear in the sky, one slightly larger than the other. The sun over-

head had a curious redness about it that subtly altered the shadows of the cubes and tubes, giving them a burned look.

Far across the metallic plain rose the gigantic trees of childhood, and near the bases of them, dwarfed by their gigantic size, he could see the low black buildings to which he must walk. He knew he had to go there. He did not know how he knew. It had the inevitability of a dream compulsion. Strangely, he felt acceptance in him. This was not his world. This was not his planet or his system. He knew that when night came he would see unthinkable constellations. He threaded his way though the geometric maze of cubes, stepping over the low tubes that joined them. He came to the open plain and walked toward the buildings. He tried to hurry and found that the best pace was a long gliding step. There was no rebellion, no questioning of reality. He was *here* and it was very necessary to get to the black buildings, and very necessary to learn what had to be learned, and acquire the skills that must be acquired. There would only be this one chance.

They came out of the buildings and he was but mildly aware of his own odd lack of curiosity about them. There was merely a sense that some of them were learning, as he would learn, and some of them taught, and some of them ran the machines for teaching.

ALL of them, men and women, and the odd looking non-men and non-women, wore heavy skirt-like garments that extended to mid-thigh as their only covering. They chattered in strange tongues, and some spoke awkward English, and some spoke good English. He was herded quickly into a room, stripped, scorched with a harsh spray of some astringent liquid, given a garment and hurried along into another place where he was measured by a pair of violet-eyed non-women, whose faces were subtly wrong, whose movements were curiously articulated in a quite unexpected fashion. He know, somehow, that it was measurement that they did. As they swung the little burring heads of the glowing equipment down over his body, as he felt the chitter and nibbling, and saw the smooth gray plates dropping into the trough near the wall, he sensed that every grain and fiber and atom of him was being measured and remembered and recorded. He cooperated like an automaton. Like a man who has gone to the same barber for so many years he has learned to move his head to exactly the right angle at exactly the right time. He suffered the wheel and blackout of the ribbands that encircled his head, the electronic cluckings of the little plates that sucked against his temples.

Cleaned and dressed and measured and recorded and remembered, he was sent alone down a corridor. He turned in at an open doorway, knowing that it was the right doorway. The door banged down behind him like a guillotine, and automatonism left him at one. He guessed that it was a feeling of suddenly being released from posthypnotic influence. There was the same fear, the same uncertainty.

The girl stared at him. She had dark tangled hair, broken fingernails, a hard bold bright light in her eyes. Her garment was a livid orange that went well with the sleek brown lines of her dusky body. The room walls were cocoa brown, rounded at the corners, featureless. There was light, without visible light source.

She spoke to him in a harsh tongue, her voice rising at the end of the phrase in a question.

He shook his head. "I don't understand." She tried again, slowly. He shrugged. She made an obscene gesture with her hands, spat on the floor toward his feet, turned her back.

He stared at the simple furnishings of the sealed room, the rigid cots, the two chairs, the single table.

"You have been placed together because you cannot understand each other's language."

The voice seemed to have its origin inside his head. He saw the girl wheel, look for the source of the voice, and he knew that she heard it too.

"This room is so constructed that it aids the projection and reception of thought. When you have learned to give your thoughts to each other, you will find that together you can open the door."

The voice stopped. They looked speculatively at each other. He looked into her

eyes and tried to will her to go to the table and sit at one of the chairs. He made the command clear in his mind. She was staring hard at him. She suddenly shrugged and turned away, and he guessed that she had been trying to will some message into his brain. He had neither projected nor received. It was going to be far more difficult than he had imagined. He tried to think of some simple way they could experiment.

At last he took her arm and pulled her over to one of the chairs. She sat down, scowling at him, obviously disliking being touched. He sat in the other chair so that they faced each other across the table. He bit off a sizable fragment of fingernail, showed it to her. She looked puzzled. He put his hands behind him, transferred it to his left hand, and then placed both fists on the table.

"Left," he thought. "Left hand."

She reached out and tentatively touched his left hand. He showed her the bit of nail and she beamed at him, clapped her hands. Then, after many more attempts, they both became depressed. She was correct six out of ten times, then seven out of twelve, and then eleven out of twenty. He tried each time to push the thought into her mind. It was much like being under water and trying to push against a huge stone. One could kick weakly, but there was no pivot place. No place to brace the feet. No way to put force behind the effort.

He was pleased to see that she had a determination and tenacity that matched his own. Her small jaw was set hard with the effort. She took the fragment of nail and tried. He strained to hear her thoughts, found that he was only guessing, operating solely on hunches. They worked at it with stubborn energy until they were exhausted. His despair was transformed into anger at her. He could not succeed because they had given him this fool girl. Anyone else but this ignorant wench with the hot eyes and the gypsy manners.

He looked into her dark eyes and glowered at her. He backed slowly within his mind until he had a place where he could seem to brace himself. As though he had his shoulders against a thin hard membrane an inch in back of his eyes.

You're too stupid.

HER hard brown hand flashed and caught him across the mouth. She half stood up with blazing eyes and then slowly sank back into the chair, looking a bit awed.

He found the same place within his mind to brace himself and tried this time, forcibly, yet without anger. *Nod your head if you can understand me.*

She nodded her head violently, white teeth gleaming in the dusky face.

Stand up and then sit down again. She obeyed like a chastened child, demure and obedient. He found that even that short practice enabled him to do it with more ease.

You must learn, too. I found it by accident. He touched his temple. *Imagine a thin hard wall in here. You must back against it to . . . be braced. And then you must . . . throw your thought from that position, thinking of each word.*

She frowned at him. She raised her eyebrows in question.

I heard nothing. Try again.

There was a black flame in the depths of her eyes. *You are a big arrogant clown.*

I got that clearly. Try again.

She flushed. *It was anger. Anger made it easier.*

I should have told you that. How did you come here?

A man took me to a large villa. There were other men. I saw frightful visions. They tortured my mind. I was put in a big gray box. It brought me here.

Do you know why you are here?

I am aware that there are things which must be learned. This is one of them. There will be others. This way of talking makes one weary. There is the matter of the door. It was said to us that together we could open it. Yet there is no latch.

When I snap my fingers we will both speak to the door the way we have spoken to each other, as strongly as possible, saying but one word. Open

They both looked toward the door. He snapped his fingers. He could feel her projected thought blending with his own. The door slid slowly up out of sight into the groove overhead.

She reached the door first, ran through, and then turned and walked, docile and mild, down the corridor.

As soon as he reached the corridor, he felt the automaton will overcome his own. It turned him in the opposite direction.

A huge man who reminded him of a brown bear stepped out of a doorway to bar the hallway.

My congratulations. That was very rapid. You are a latent. Some have remained in that room for a thousand hours. Project to me. It is called para-voice.

Dake found it much harder to manage outside the room. The rigidity against which he tried to brace himself was softer, more yielding.

It was easier in the room.

"It always is. But I could receive you. We will use normal voice now. Para-voice is tiring. You will be given practice hours from time to time."

The big man took Dake's arm. Dake willed himself to pull away, but could not. He allowed himself to be led down the corridor.

"This place is called Training T. I have been here for twice your lifetime. It is work that pleases me best. Now we have our little surprise for you. The technicians found your best memory, my boy. It is ready now. You have not slept in years, you know. Not really slept. Too much conflict in your mind. Here you must sleep. Drugs are not effective. Only true sleep will heal your mind, my boy."

They came to a big door that was oddly familiar, ringing a tiny chime in the back of his weary mind.

The big brown man turned the old-fashioned knob and the door swung inward, as Dake had known it would. Dake walked into his room and the man closed the door softly behind him.

It was his room. His bed. The lamp was on over his bed. It had been a plain parchment shade, and one day he had found the silhouette of a sailing ship in a magazine. His mother had helped him cut out the hard parts. The room was in perfect scale to him. Perfect scale for an eight year old boy. Familiar pattern of the rag rug. The stain where he had spilled the grape juice. Place where he had crayoned the wall through the bars of the crib. No crib now. The big soft bed, with the pillows starched and white. The bed was turned down, and the flannel pajamas were laid out, where mother always put them. Faded blue pajamas with a faint white stripe. Slippers with the heels all broken down and a lot of the lamb's wool worn off.

He undressed and put his clothes on the same chair as always and put on the pajamas and pulled the string tight at his waist and tied it. He shoved his feet into the slippers and went through the other door to the bathroom. He had to reach high to get his battered toothbrush with the chipped pink handle. The big tub had feet like white claws that clasped white porcelain. Those tub feet had always fascinated him. He scrubbed his knuckles because there probably wouldn't be much time in the morning before school.

He padded back into his bedroom, closing the bathroom door behind him. He looked at his books and ran his fingers over the backs of the bindings. He opened a cigar box and looked at the shells he'd collected at Marblehead last summer. He turned out the light and went over to the window and opened it. He knelt for a time with his chin on the sill and looked out. Boston lighted the sky. He could see the familiar single street light across the back yards. It was haloed with soft snow. Snow was falling in Chelsea, sticking to the bare branches of the big elm in the back yard.

Somebody in the neighborhood had Christmas carols on the radio. He wondered if he'd get the bike. They said it was too dangerous in the street, and the police wouldn't let you ride on the sidewalk. Heck, you could be careful, couldn't you?

He crossed the dark room, knelt for the barest minimum of prayer, and scrambled up between the crisp sheets, nestling down, pulling the blankets up over him. A red bike. Joey's was blue.

He yawned and turned onto his side, warm and certain in the knowledge that after he was asleep his mother would look in, tuck the blankets in, kiss him. He could hear daddy down in the kitchen with some of his friends. He heard the low voices and then the rich explosion of baritone laughter, suddenly hushed. He guesssed mother was telling them not to make so much noise.

He banged at the pillow, turned onto his other side, and gently coasted down the long velvet slope on the magical red bike, into the deep sweet shadows of sleep.

He came vaguely awake when she came in, and he stirred at the touch of her lips. "You think I'll get it?"

"Get what, dear?"

Irritation at such density. "The bike. The red bike."

"We'll have to wait and see, won't we? Now go to sleep, dear."

Firm hand fixing the blankets. He was faintly aware of the tallness of her standing over him, the faint sweet scent of her. The floor creaked as she crossed to the window, closed it a little. Somewhere people were laughing in the night. She closed his door behind her as she left the room. She hummed to herself as she headed toward the stairs.

XI

SCHOOL was getting harder all the time. That darn Miss Crowe. Always making it tough just before vacation. All the kids were excited about the Japs bombing Pearl Harbor. He wished he'd been at Pearl Harbor. Zoooom! Shoot'em down.

That darn Miss Crowe. "Chlidren, we are going to study Projection." She wrote it on the board, spelling it as she wrote. "Now you all know what electricity is." She stepped to the front seats and tapped Joey on the head. She made that funny smile, like when she thinks her jokes are funny, and said, "Joseph's head is full of electricity. It's what he thinks with." The whole class laughed and Joey got red as a beet.

"But Joseph's electrical field is unorganized. Think of one of those big signs overlooking the Common. Now those signs spell out words. All the light bulbs light at once to spell out a word. If all those little light bulbs were flickering, going on and off without any order at all, we couldn't read the word, could we? Sometimes Joseph, by accident, makes all the little bulbs light at once, usually when he's very excited or upset, and then we can sometimes see his thoughts, not clearly of course, but enough to know for a split second what he is thinking. It happens so seldom, however, that we never recognize it as true Projection. We call it a hunch, or a good guess. In Projection we will all learn first how to make the words clear. And after we have made the words clear, then we will learn how to project real images. We'll project dogs and cats and new toys and everything we can imagine."

"A red bike?" Dake said without thinking.

Miss Crowe looked at him. "Yes, a red bike, Dake. But I shouldn't advise you to try and ride it." Everybody laughed at him and he got as red as Joey had been.

Maralyn, who was always asking questions and bringing junk to Miss Crowe, stuck her hand up.

"Yes dear?"

"Miss Crowe, if all that goes on in somebody's head, how can somebody else see it?"

"It isn't actually seeing, Maralyn. Joseph has energy in his brain. Projection is a case of learning to focus that energy. And because each of us uses the same sort of energy to do our thinking, Joseph can learn to focus it so strongly that he actually does our thinking for us."

"Suppose I don't want *him* doing my thinking for *me*," Maralyn said with contempt.

"As we are learning Projection, dear, we will also learn how to close our minds against it."

Maralyn sat down, flouncing a little in the seat. Dake hated her.

Miss Crowe went back to her desk. Joey looked happy to have her stop tapping his head. It seemed to make him nervous.

"Now, class, this will be a little demonstration to show you what we will be able to do, every one of us, before summer vacation."

Dake liked that part. She just sat there looking at the class, and, gosh, she put songs in your head, and band music, and she made some poems, and then a whole lot of puppies came running in through the closed doors, and bright colored birds flew around and made a heck of a racket. It was really keen the way she could do that.

But after that first day, the fun was all gone. It got dull and hard. Standing up there like a goof and trying to give the

whole class some dopey word. Miss Crowe would write it on a piece of paper, write a lot of things on pieces of paper and you drew out your piece and it was always some dopey word. House, farm, cow, seashell, road, lamp, doctor. Never good words like bike, pirate, sloop, robber, pistol.

Christmas came, and no red bike because it was too dangerous. There was a big Flexy Flyer that wasn't bad, but it turned warm and there wasn't any ice. He horsed around with Joey most of the vacation and they projected stuff at each other, and he worked at trying to make a bike he could see, even if he couldn't ride it, like Miss Crowe said.

He got so he could make some stuff, but not a good bike. One afternoon he made a swell red bike, right in his room, but he couldn't hold onto it. It got shimmery and went away and he couldn't bring it back.

When school started again the whole class got so they could do the words sharp and clear. Then there were little sentences. Kid stuff. I see the horse. The horse sees me. My uncle owns a cat. It has kittens. It sleeps in the barn. That Maralyn was a pain. She projected words so sharp they hurt your head and you wished there was some way you could put your fingers in your ears to stop the racket.

Next they got hard words. You want to do "cat" and you can think of a cat all right, but a word like "thought" or "religion" or "doubt"—it was tough to think of ways to put it across. But finally they all got that. And then they had to take turns going further and further down the hall and doing the hard sentences. Maralyn was the only one who could go way out in the school yard by the swings and still make you hear. It was pretty faint and you had to strain for it, but she could do it.

Next came learning how to shut it out. In order to push out the words you had to sort of brace yourself against a sort of imaginary membrane in your mind. Miss Crowe called that the "first screen." Finally they all got the trick of being able to sort of get that membrane around in front of your thoughts. You had to kind of slide through it and then hold it up in the way, and it blocked out all the projection. It sure was a relief to be able to stop hearing that screamy noise Maralyn could put in your head.

Miss Crowe said that because her mind was stronger, she could project right through your screen if she really poured on the coal, but that would hurt you and the screen would have to heal up before you could project or receive or anything. She said that she had four screens she could put up, one behind the other. She said that with all of them down, she could catch projections even when the person wasn't trying to project, provided they didn't have any screen up. She said that when they had all learned how to project and receive selectively, and could make images, and knew how to use the second screen, then they could all be called Stage One. To get to be a Stage Two like her and use all screens you had to really work at it. Gee, it looked as if school would last the rest of his life.

BUT it got to be sort of fun when they got so they could make the images. Illusions, Miss Crowe sometimes called them. It turned out Joey was better at it than Maralyn, and that sure scalded Maralyn. Joey had an animal book home, and one day he about startled Miss Crowe out of her wits by having a gaint sloth hanging from the transom over the door to the classroom. Dake worked on the red bike until he could make it with no trouble. After a while it got dull, making the bike, so he made other things. But working on the bike had helped. He could make things almost as good as Joey could. Joey got in bad trouble though with Miss Crowe. He got his hands on a medical book with illustrations, and he kept making little tiny naked women running around when Miss Crowe wasn't looking, and Maralyn told on him. Miss Crowe said if he kept acting up, she'd burst his first screen and give him a long rest until he learned how to use his new skill. Her nose always got white when she got mad.

Dake made a great big dog that followed him around and only disappeared when he forgot it. Once in his room he made a boy that looked just like him, exactly, and that scared him a little. But it gave him new ideas. Once on the way home with Joey, he saw Maralyn and so he made a duplicate of her standing right in front of her, only

Maralyn had her head under her arm. Maralyn went screaming into her house and told Miss Crowe the next day, and he got the word, just as Joey had. Then she gave the whole class a big dull lecture about misusing your talents and all that sort of thing. He and Joey could talk easy to each other in that para-voice, but it was funny how it seemed quieter and nicer to really talk, and say the words.

The big test came right before summer vacation, and each one of them had to go all alone up to the principal's office. A lot of funny looking people were sitting around. Dake was pretty nervous. He had to talk in para-voice to each one of them separately, and then to the whole group and then to any two of them. Then he was told to screen himself and they pushed at the screen. They pushed so hard it hurt badly, but he didn't yell, and they didn't break the screen. He guessed they were just testing to see how strong it was. He had the feeling they could bust through in a minute if they wanted to. Next they made him lift the first screen and they pushed on the second one. He wasn't so sure of how to use the second one, and it was a different kind of pain, not quite as sharp but worse, somehow. Then he had to illusion up a bunch of stuff. From a list. It was pretty hard stuff. A little full moon the size of an apple, and a life size Model A Ford, and his father and mother. They gave him a chance to fix up the illusions a little when they didn't look quite right. The Ford was the worst, because he couldn't remember how the front end was supposed to look, so it stayed a little bit misty until he put a Chevvy front end on it.

They told him he'd passed and the big brown-looking man shook hands with him and he walked out to go back to the class. But he walked out into a long shining black corridor that he'd never seen before.

THERE was a funny twisty feeling in his brain and suddenly he remembered where he was. The room, the shell collection, the red bike he didn't get. They were all twenty-six long years ago. Joey had been dead for years. Maralyn had married Vic Hudson and gone to live in Australia. He desperately resented being drawn back up into life, out of the best years, the long golden endless years.

The big brown man took his arm.

"You did as well as I expected you to, Dake."

"Was it all . . ."

"Illusion? Of course. We find that if we regress the student to the happiest time of his life, before the world began to disappoint him, it increases his speed of receptivity. You've spent a great many weeks meeting each day with one of our better instructors and illusionists."

Dake felt as though the illusion of the lost years had somehow healed him, made him stronger and more certain.

"And now I have the abilities of a Stage One?"

"Just the mental abilities. There are some physical skills to learn."

"It seems to me like a crazy contradiction. You teach me something that, if you taught it to . . . everyone on earth, all the bad things would be erased. Hate, fear. No more conflict.

The man continued to walk him down the featureless corridor. "Quite true," he said mildly.

"Why isn't this knowledge used for good?"

"This answer may seem very indirect to you. But it is an answer. I am a failure. Too mild. Too sympathetic. I bleed from the heart too often, Dake. So I'm better off here."

"Indirect? It doesn't mean anything."

"Don't be impatient. You've graduated to one of the huts near the game fields. We've seen the last of you here . . . until next time."

"Where do I go?"

"Just go out that door. The instruction beam will pick you up. You'll find that you'll walk to exactly where you are supposed to go."

Dake walked across a field of spongy aqua-colored grass. He turned and looked back, saw the low black buildings, the grotesquely enormous trees, the metallic plain beyond with its intensely orderly arrangement of cubes. The brown man stood in the black doorway.

Good luck!

Dake lifted an arm, turned and went on,

feeling only a massive certainty that he was headed in the right direction.

The huts ringed the enormous game fields. They were of the same featureless black of the larger buildings so far away that the big trees over them were on the far horizon. The huts were set far apart. There was a single communal building. The guiding influence led him directly to the communal building. On the far side of the game fields was a small group, too far away for him to see what they were doing. There were more of the violet-eyed non-human clerks in the communal building. They had a grotesque and peculiar grace of their own. The influence over him was not as strong as when he had first reported. His acceptance was not as automatic. And their attitude was different. They seemed servile, humble, overcourteous as several small objects were handed to him.

If it would please you, these objects should be taken to your hut. We cannot approach the huts or we would take them.

Which hut?

They all made thin sounds of pain, cringing before him.

Too strong, too strong. The words were sweet-singing in his brain. One of them moved carefully around him to the door, pointed. *That one, Earthling. Then you must join the others.*

He crossed to the hut, carrying the odd objects in his hands. The interior was stark. Bed, table, chair. He placed the objects on the table, fingered them curiously, joined the group at the far side of the game fields.

He counted them as he approached. Eleven. Some turned and looked toward him. He stopped abruptly as a stone-faced middle-aged woman appeared directly in front of him. Her expression was wise, sardonic, half-amused.

"Lorin, I see. Consider yourself a straggler. No one seems to organize things properly any more. Where is the gypsy girl?"

"I haven't any idea."

"Meet your fellow sufferers."

She gave the names quickly as Dake faced the group. His glance moved across one lean tough masculine face, moved quickly back to it. "Tommy! I . . ." He took two steps toward the familiar man and then stopped suddenly, wary. He glanced toward the stone-faced woman who had called herself Marina.

"No, I'm not an illusion," Tommy said in his slow familiar drawl. He approached Dake, gripped his hand strongly. "Satisfy you?"

MARINA said, "You may take a break, Watkins. Go off and gabble with your long lost Dake Lorin."

They walked apart from the others. Dake covered his confusion by saying, "How long?" Not since the war, is it? Last I heard you left the city desk and went to Florida to run some jerkwater newspaper, Tommy. I envied you. It seemed to be a good answer."

Are you thinking I have any answers to . . . all this?

Dake stared at him. *I was hoping as much.*

And I'm hoping you have some answers. I don't know where we are, how we got here, or whether you happen to be a figment of my diseased imagination.

Tommy flung himself down onto the springy odd-colored grass and spoke aloud. "Nobody else in the . . . ah . . . class has the vaguest idea. See, we've got a couple of Chinese, and a Malay and a pair of Austrians. But no language problems, chum, in para-voice. Sentence construction comes through a little strange sometimes. We do a lot of chatting. So I can tell you just what happened to you, Dake. You got mixed up in something-or-other, and so many weird things were beginning to happen you thought you were going off your rocker. So finally you found yourself in New York or Madrid where they slapped you in a gray box and you tumbled out here, and these characters began to teach you stuff that's patently impossible. Oh, we have long discussions. Many of them about reality. Big question. Are we really here?"

Dake sat nearby. "How did you get here?"

"Started to do a series on a guy doing some fantastic work in agriculture. I began to get the weird idea somebody was guiding him. Steering his mind for him. Clues led to a racketeer named Miguel Larner in New York. Went to see Larner. He nearly drove me crazy. Almost but not quite. So here I am."

"Mine is about the same. I'll tell you about it later. Right now, Tommy, what do we know? Somehow we got onto a different planet. We've run into a culture and a technology far superior to ours. They're training us to raise hell on earth."

"I go along with that, Dake. On the surface, an evil pitch. Underneath, I . . . don't know. There is something . . . terribly important that we don't know yet. When we know it, it will somehow explain everything. Ever dream you have discovered the ultimate answer to everything and wake up with it just on the edge of your mind?"

"What goes on here, at this place?"

"You get your hut and they organize your day like it was a YMCA summer camp. Do this, do that. A few physical skills. And mostly mental skills. They stretch hell out of your brain. Memory, analysis, and so on. Things come back in a funny way. I can replay from memory every chess game, every bridge hand, in my history. A year ago that would have been a crazy thought. Right now we're struggling with something called a Pack B."

"What's that?"

"Something you'll have to experience for yourself, baby. Another thing. Have you ever had such an almost overpowering feeling of physical well-being?"

"I hadn't thought of it. I . . . guess not."

"Has air ever smelled as good, or food tasted as good? Every day seems like Saturday."

"You sound happy here. What have you done, Tommy? Found a home?"

Tommy gave him a bland look. "Maybe. I'm waiting for the great revelation. We all are." He stood up, looked soberly down at Dake for a moment. "Here is one clue to think over. We see quite a few people around who never came off earth. They're all man-like. Just funny variations here and there. All in the same general form, however. And, Dake, listen. Every single one of them treats us as though we were all potentates. Come on. Join the group. Marina's ready to howl."

They rejoined the group. Marina formed them into a hollow circle. Practice in cooperative illusion, she said. Marina created the illusion—an exceptionally lovely girl who strolled around and around inside the formal circle. At any moment, just as the girl walked in front of you, Marina might cancel the illusion. It was up to the nearest student to recreate her so quickly and perfectly that there was barely any hiatus of nothingness. Dake was clumsy the first time. He saw that it had to be done in such a way that the stride was unbroken. The second time it happened directly in front of him he did better. A second girl joined the first and they walked hand in hand. And then a third. Marina made their costumes more intricate. She made them walk faster. It became an exhausting exercise in hair-trigger reflexes, in memorization and visualization of all details. After over an hour of it, Dake felt as though his head would burst.

There was food, and rest, and another session. Mass illusion this time. Create as many people as you can, to the outermost limitations of your resources, bearing in mind constantly that each individual thus created had to be remembered and concentrated on in toto, or the illusion would become evanescent. At first Dake could handle no more than six. By the end of the session he had more than doubled it, and was rewarded with Marina's sour smile.

There were variations on those games day after day. At night the alien stars would pinpoint the sky with brightness. He spent the rare leisure hours with his friend, Watkins. They made endless conjectures.

Apprehensive beings were brought to the game fields. They were not quite human when examined closely. They did not seem so much frightened as awed. And, using them as subjects, Marina taught the class the fundamentals of control. It required a more massive concentration of energy than para-voice, or illusioning, and it was most difficult to give proper neural directions. Even Marina could cause only an approximation of a normal walk, and balance was difficult to maintain. The controlled beings often fell onto the soft turf. Range was slowly increased, and when the class was adept, they were permitted to practice control on each other, being careful always to take both screens out of the way before accepting control. Dake found that he did not like the feeling of psychic nakedness that came when neither of his two mental screens

protected him. After he had run Tommy awkwardly into the side of a hut when trying to control him through the door, Tommy had rubbed his bruised nose and said, "As a superman, kid, you're a waste of time."

It gave them a new description of their abilities. The supermen. The endowed ones. The little gods who would, they hoped, walk the earth. The best daydreams were about what could be done with the new abilities.

Tommy said, "Nobody has ever been able to get my brother-in-law off the bottle. I'm going to give that boy such a roomful of snakes and little pink elephants that he'll gag whenever he sees a liquor advertisement."

Dake said, "I'm going to control every Pak-Indian I meet. Make them drop to their knees before the Great Lorin."

"Seriously, Dake, what are we going to do with all these . . . talents?"

"We don't have to earn a living. Just control the cashier and have him hand you the money. Or give him an illusion of a few thousand rupees for deposit. He'll mark the book and when you walk out of the bank it will disappear out of the drawer."

"You have larceny in your heart."

"Tommy, I keep remembering a brown-haired girl named Karen Voss. I know now that she was trained here. Most of the things she bewildered me with, I think I could do. But she helped get me out of a bad spot, and somebody stronger than she was, ripped her screens."

"Gives me a headache to think about it."

"Think a minute. Was the person who damaged her trained somewhere else? Are there two groups raising hell with each other? Is earth a battlefield? If so, we're just a couple of likely recruits."

"I'm not fighting any one else's war," Tommy said firmly. "I had a dandy of my own once."

THE next day control was dropped and instruction in the Pack B's began again. Dake quickly learned the sequence of the control wheels and how to use them. Visualization was something else again. A hundred times he tried. A hundred times he tried to cover a distance of ten feet, and each time felt the sickening sensation of negative mass, and each time achieved plus mass in the exact place where he had started. Marina explained that the visualization of the intended destination had to be far stronger than the visualization required for illusioning. He would memorize each blade of grass, each irregularity of the earth, step back and try again. Tommy suddenly learned how. He was ecstatic with this new sense of freedom. He was obnoxiously ecstatic. He flicked about, endlessly, pausing only to wave derisively toward where Dake stood and struggled.

Dake tried again and again and again. And another failure. He was about to try again when he suddenly realized that he had covered the distance. He backed up and tried again. Slowly he discovered that the strength of the visualization was actually more important than the exactness of it. He set off after Tommy, slowly improving his skill.

For days the class played a mad game of tag around the huge game fields. Then they were taken into open country and permitted to use the full range of the Pack B. There were races across empty miles of landscape where the high trees formed the only reference points. They learned that you could visualize the face of a friend as though it were a yard in front of you, and then make the shift. If the friend was within range of your Pack B, you would suddenly appear in front of him. The sequence of days was confused. New skills, new abilities, and something else, too. A group pride.

In one of her rare informative moods Marina said, "Selection has to be a trial by fire. If you can be broken, you will break. None of you did. And thus we can be assured that you will not break in quite another way—that you will not begin to think that these new powers set you apart from mankind, that you will not misuse them for personal gain. We are called Earthling. It is a good title."

There was a day of pageant, of intense competition. The illusions were watched by vast crowds, who made sighing sounds of approval.

After the crowds had gone, Marina said, "There is nothing more I can teach you. There is only one last thing for you to

learn. Those who are already on tour must instruct you in that. We will see you here twice again before you are . . . ready."

They went back to the long low black buildings of first instruction. They did not plod across the fields in the gray dusk. They flicked across the flat plains, appearing, disappearing, appearing further on. They projected to each other, writing the questioning words bright in each other's minds.

They were given rooms. In the middle of the night Dake was awakened. The clothes he had arrived in were waiting. He dressed on command, and was taken to the place of the cubes. Hard pain struck him. He clambered through the orifice into the rock cavern. He walked up the slanting glow of the tunnel and into Miguel Larner's dioramic garden. It was late afternoon. Karen sat alone, and she smiled at him.

He went to her quickly. He tried to project to her, to ask her if she was well. He felt the projected thought strike screens rigidly drawn, rebound as though from metal. The rebuff angered him.

"I suppose I report to Miguel," he said.

"He's gone, Dake. It was a very impressive funeral."

"Dead!"

"An illusion was buried. Miguel has . . . gone. He finished what he had to do. Martin Herman is in charge."

"Do I report to him?"

"He's not here. What gives you the idea you have to report to anybody?"

"I thought . . ."

"Go to the same room you were in before. Stay there until called."

XII

DAKE went to the room. He found clothes that would fit him. He set the diorama on automatic control to give him an approximation of day and night. Food was brought at regular intervals. There was a projector, micro-books, music. He exercised to keep himself fit.

Stay there until called.

He had detected a warmth, a friendliness in her before. It had disappeared. He felt put upon, neglected. And he was indignant.

At times he would drop both screens and listen, almost trembling with the effort to be receptive. He would get merely the vague awareness of others somewhere near him. No thoughts ever came through.

One evening she tapped lightly at the door, came in, unasked, and sat down.

"Are you getting impatient?"

"I'm bored."

"The other night you made a detailed illusion of me, and had me sit and talk nicely to you for a time. I'm flattered, Dake."

"I didn't know I'd be spied on here."

"We're all very interested in you. We're interested in all fresh new dewy-eyed Stage Ones."

"You've changed, Karen."

"Karen Voss? That was a hypno-fix. A nice cover story. You can call me Karen if it will make you feel more at ease."

"Thank you," he said with grave dignity.

She laughed at him and he flushed. He said, "I learned enough to know that you made a considerable sacrifice for me."

Her eyes changed for a moment. She made a vague gesture. "It is everyone's duty to recruit. Material is scarce, you know. It always has been. You were my little gesture, so Merman has made me your house mother. Rather unfair, I think. Stage Ones are dull."

"I had an old friend. I met him at Training T. He kept talking about an ultimate answer. Does giving any ultimate answer come under the heading of responsibilities of the house mother?"

"It helped you, Dake. You're not quite as stuffy."

"I'm getting damn sick of mystery."

"We'll take a walk. Come on. See the great world outside. Now see if you can remember the lobby well enough to shift it. Wait a moment. I'll check with Johnny to see if we have any strangers around." She paused a moment. "It's all right."

He made the lobby as quickly as he could. Yet she was there ahead of him, smiling at him.

"See what we have, Johnny?" she said, taking Dake's arm.

"In spite of all wagers to the contrary," Johnny said. *Welcome home.*

Thanks.

"I sometimes think you Ones are the

worst snobs of all," Karen said. "I'll have to orient you, Dake. A June evening. 1968. That article you published last year made quite a stir. Don't walk so fast! But you repudiated it. So all the excitement died down, and people forgot about it in the excitement of George Fahdi's assassination. You were convicted of a Disservice and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. The lovely Patrice was in a nursing home and couldn't bribe you out of it. A poor little Stage One had a hideous time keeping the illusion of you going through the quick trial, sentence and shipment. As soon as you were in the labor camp, he quit, of course, so now you're a fugitive from justice. But they aren't going to hunt too hard. Martin bribed the right people."

"You're going too quickly, Karen. I don't . . ."

"Don't try. We'll just have a little stroll."

He held his screens firm, so that there was no possibility of her catching any fragment of his plan. He casually slipped his hand into his pocket, built up a powerful visualization of the hotel room where he had last stayed in New York. He worked the small wheels with his thumbnail. The shift to the hotel room was instantaneous. A puffy white-haired man in a dressing gown gaped at him. "How did you get in here, sir?" A pretty vacant-eyed girl wearing very little of anything came to the bathroom door and stared at him.

"Wrong room," Dake said. "Sorry."

"Couldn't you knock, dammit?"

"Sorry," Dake said. He moved to the door, unlocked it, hurried out into the corridor.

He went down the hallway, conscious of his conspicuous height. He went down the stairs and out into the warm June evening. He was painfully aware of how the months on Training T had heightened all his perceptions. Sounds seemed too loud, impressions too vivid. The world was a swarming mass of lurid, confusing detail. He had to get away from it, get away to some quiet place where he could think and plan.

He went to another hotel, gave illusion money to be clerk, pocketed his real change, tipped the bell hop with some of it. The room was small, depressingly dingy. He turned off the lights, put a chair over by the window and sat in it, looking out at the skyline.

FUNNY how this was supposed to be home, yet he felt a strangeness here. As though he were no longer a part of it. He remembered his original resolve, that resolve that had never weakened—learn everything you can and come home and use it to expose them.

Let the guy in the street know that he was being pushed around.

And the man in the street would ask WHY?

Dake did not know why. The thing seemed planless. Another extension of the games field.

Now be coherent with yourself. Collate the data. Set up an operating plan. Through the use of illusion you could land a space ship in New Times Square, march a goggle-headed crew of Martians down Broadway. That, perhaps, would start man thinking about interference—on an extraterrestial basis.

"You're a hard man to find," Karen said, behind him.

He turned quickly, almost relieved at momentarily escaping the necessity of making a plan.

She said, "That illusion with the money did it. I caught the direction of that. You can't use anything you've learned, Dake, without it being detectable."

The meager light of the night city touched her face, touched her cool alien eyes. She seemed to be looking at him with that remote speculation of an entomologist awaiting emergence from the cocoon.

He tried to project, to probe her mind. The screen was like metallic rock.

"All your tricks," he said, almost incoherently. "All your dirty little inhuman devices. They . . ."

All *our* tricks, Dake."

"Not mine. I didn't ask for it. I went along with it. No choice at all." He stood up, towering over her, his back to the light. "Now the tricks make me ashamed. They make me a . . . deviate They destroy the meaning of being a man."

"How noble!"

"You can't trace me if I don't use them, can you?"

"Can a man will himself to stop using his arms?"

He half turned from her to conceal the hand he slipped into his pocket. He thought of a ruse. Phone booths have a cookie cutter similarity. He visualized quickly, flipping the wheels, feeling the surge of sickening nothingness, the sudden recapitulation of himself staring at the black phone a foot from his eyes. He stepped out of the booth, saw that he was in the hotel lobby downstairs, that the Pack B had selected the most immediate target visualization.

He walked out onto the street. Just as he tried to lose himself in the crowd, the thought arrowed faintly into his mind. *Dake! Run and we will kill you. We will have to. If you can hear me, come back.*

His stride faltered for a moment, and then he moved on to lose himself in the crowd. He instinctively hunched his shoulders, walked with knees slightly bent to reduce his towering height.

Learn what they can give you and use it against them. He had spent his life fighting. The equation was clear. The logic was impeccable. If *they* had the abilities he had learned, then they could put an end to the conflict on earth. They did not. Thus they were unfriendly to mankind. And man would have to know and learn. Man would have to recognize the enemy within the gates.

He remembered the one who had injured Karen, injured that previous, more understandable Karen. They seemed to fight among themselves, but with grotesquely gallant little rules. So Earth was an extension of the games field. A place where you could be aware of your own superiority. Make the silly little creatures jump. They had made him jump, had killed Branson, had driven Patrice mad. They were like arrogant children let loose in a chicken yard with rifles.

A slow-moving prowl car slid a spotlight beam across him, went on. He could hear the metallic chatter of its radio. There would be danger from two sources. According to Karen, Martin Merman had arranged it so that the authorities would not be too eager to recapture him after his supposed escape. Merman could easily reverse that. His great height made him feel naked on the streets. He knew that through his newly acquired talent of control, of illusioning, or para-voice, he could make any attempt to take him a heartbreaking matter to any federal officer. But his escape attempts would, as Karen had told him, enable them to find him easily. As long as he used none of his new abilities, they could only recognize him visually, and confirm it by projecting against the first screen in his mind.

The faces of the people on the night streets depressed him. The months on Training T seemed to have given him a heightened susceptibility to mood. He could feel the waves of tension, and despair, and aimless discontent. Cold taffy faces and metronome eyes and life-broken mouths. An animal walking the city, with the tired inviting flex and clench of buttocks, with soupy opacity of eye. He walked through futility, drowning in it. And then, slowly, began to see other things. Small things. A young boy with a rapt, dedicated face, eyes of a stricken angel, looking upward at one of the pre-war buildings, at the simple perfect beauty of structural integrity. A couple, hand in hand, who would have been alone on the busiest street in the world. An old man shuffling along—the light slanting against a face that had been twisted and torn and broken by life, leaving nothing but a look of calm and peace, a look in which there was that beauty which is endlessly a by-product of torture. Pride seemed to clog his throat. Try to smash them utterly, and yet there was always something left in th ruins. Something priceless, eternal.

As he walked, wondering where he should hide, he remembered a column in a lighter vein that he had done long ago, in, it seemed, someone else's lifetime. Dr. Oliver Krindle, psychiatrist, whose hobby was psychic research. He remembered Krindle as one of those rare, warm men not damaged by too much knowledge of the human soul. The column had been about Krindle's endless and skeptical efforts in tracking down psychic phenomena, about the two incidents out of all those years which Krindle felt did not lend themselves to any satisfactory explanation—except the obvious

one that the persons reporting them lied.

He looked up Krindle's address in a phone book, walked fifteen blocks to the narrow lightless street. He had remembered that Krindle lived alone over his office. He remembered the good and ancient brandy Krindle had served, making a ceremony of the little ritual. Brandy in a room lined with books—as though Krindle had found some special way to preserve the good things in a world in which good things were no longer understood.

THERE was a dim light in the hallway. He pressed the button, heard a distant ringing. Across the street shirtsleeved men and weary women sat on front steps, their voices slow in the warm night, their laughter oddly dreary.

Dr. Oliver Krindle came down the stairs. Dake saw the thick naked ankles, the worn slippers, the battered robe, the deceptive face of a shaven Santa. Krindle turned on the light over the door and peered through, then made a great rattling of chains and bolts.

"Come in, Lorin. Come in! Damn careful these days. Hoodlums, cretins. Violence for its own sake. That's the kind that frightens you. For profit, that is understandable. Too many people like to look at blood. Maybe it's always been that way. Come on up. I've been listening to music. Choral stuff tonight. Lots of voices in my room, eh?"

Dake followed the man up the stairs, to the quiet room he remembered. Dr. Krindle waved him to a chair, said, "I'll start this one again from the beginning. No one is in too much of a hurry for this, Lorin." He turned on the player again.

Dake leaned back in the chair, let the music sweep over him like a vast warm tide. Krindle moved slowly, making two drinks, setting one down at Dake's elbow. The music was a rich sanity, a reaffirmation of faith in man, a denial of the things he had learned.

The music stopped and Krindle turned it off. They sat in the silence for a time. Ice tinkled in Dake's glass as he raised it to his lips.

"I have read about you, Lorin. You've been busy. Disservice, sentence, escape. I knew you would be a fugitive some day. I did not know when or how."

"But you knew why?"

"Of course. You meet environment in too direct a manner. So your environment is embarassed. It doesn't like defects pointed out. So it destroys you."

"Martyr?"

"Yes. Without purpose. Your defeat does not add impetus to any creed or group or movement. The solitary man. The flaw, possibly, is in believing too much in yourself. If that is a flaw. I don't know. Once upon a time I told myself I would never compromise. Oh, I was young and brave. Now I look back on life. A life of listening to the anxious daydreams of neurotic women. Little minds so shallow that they present but one surface, Lorin."

"What is normalcy, Oliver? Stability?"

"It doesn't exist. Just a convenient line you draw. Everybody overlaps that line at some point, and deviates widely at another. Add up all the aspects of an individual, and you can only classify him as an individual. No two men have ever been mentally sick or mentally well in the same way—with the exception of physiological mental illness. We are all, unfortunately, unique. How simple my profession would be if I could type people, safely and accurately!"

"Suppose it were your function to drive a man mad. How would you go about it?"

"First I would change your terminology. How would I go about creating a mental illness. The classic way is to present him with an insoluble problem, and make it necessary for survival for him to solve that problem. The rat in a maze with no exit."

"Suppose you could make his senses give him . . . nonsense messages."

"Wouldn't that be another aspect of the same classic problem, Dake Lorin? To survive, it is necessary to be able to trust what your eyes and ears and touch and smell tell you. If the data they present to the brain is patently impossible, then the subject has a classic problem. I must trust my senses in order to survive. My senses cannot be trusted. What do I do? But aren't you thinking of a result rather than a cause. A patient will hallucinate when he can no longer stand the sane messages his senses give him. A wife is unfaithful. So he hears a voice

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coming out of the fireplace. It says to kill her."

"What happens if the cart is before the horse?"

"Will he kill her, you mean? That depends on how dependent he is on his ears and eyes and sense of touch. Roughly, I would say the more meager the intelligence, the more likely the patient is to obey a false message. What have your false messages been?"

Dake studied his thick hard knuckles. "I looked into a mirror. The left side of my face was a naked skull. I touched it. It was hard and cold. Two persons with me saw it, too. One went mad and one fainted."

"I would say that you had subconsciously recognized the duality of your life, recognized a death wish."

"If two others saw it?"

"Once I had a patient who resented the way people on the street would stop and pet his three-headed purple dog. It followed him everywhere."

"Suppose I told you, Oliver, that I can make you stand up against your will, pick up that record off the turntable and break it on the hearth."

"Perhaps you could, if I were willing to submit to hypnosis."

"Suppose I tell you that I can create a . . . three-headed purple dog right here and that you will be able to see it. Or tell you that I can project words into your mind, so that you can know what I am saying without my speaking."

OLIVER Krindle took a slow sip of his drink. "I would say that you have had much strain lately. You were trying to help the world. The world destroyed your effectiveness. You cannot admit that you are ineffective.

The struggle is too important to you. You compensate by endowing yourself with strange psychic gifts which seem to restore your effectiveness."

"Why have you always been interested in psychic research?"

"For the same reason that a man who is trying to grow an orchard will be interested in a thick dark woods next door."

"Then you believe, Oliver, that there is much that you do not know."

"Do I look that arrogant? Of course there is much I do not know."

"Have you ever wondered if all the mystery in our world might come from one special source?"

"Martians, Irish visions?"

"What if the world we know is a test tube? A culture dish? A continuous bacterial conflict?"

Oliver half closed his eyes. "Interesting from a speculative point of view. But it has been done too many times before. Show me the agency."

"I'm one of them."

Oliver opened his eyes widely. "It would please me, Dake Lorin, if you would stay here tonight."

"I'm one of them, but I don't want to be one of them. They're after me. They'll kill me, and mankind will never know what . . . opposes it. I can't demonstrate talents, because they are sensitive to that. They can find me."

"Lorin, I . . ."

Dake leaned forward. "Shut up a minute. I'm going to take a chance. But I am going to make it very quick. You'll have to get whatever you can get from it in a very few seconds."

"Have you thought what you would do if your . . . mysterious powers fail?"

"That's why I came here. If they fail, I've been mad for months on end. But they won't fail. Do you see that corner of the table, directly under the lamp. There is nothing there, Oliver, is there?"

"Of course not, but . . ."

"And you are resisting any attempt at hypnosis, are you not?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Watch the corner of the table," Dake said softly. He did the simplest illusion he could think of. A featureless white cube, about three inches on a side. He let it remain on the corner of the table for no longer than two seconds, and then erased it.

He had watched the cube. He turned his eyes to Oliver Krindle's face. Under the cheerful red cheeks the flesh tone had gone chalky gray. The glass trembled violently as he lifted it to his lips. Some of the drink sloshed out onto the ancient dressing gown. The glass chattered as he set it back down on the broad arm of his chair.

"I may not have much time, Oliver. They may come for me. I want you to know . . ."

"One of the most startling demonstrations of hypnosis," Krindle said, too loudly," that I have ever seen."

"I came to you because of all the men I know, you are the most likely to react to this in a sane and competent manner."

Krindle chuckled, too loudly, too flatly. "Sometimes the sick mind can perform startling things, Lorin. Think of the cataleptic trance, for example. Think of the classic sign of the stigmata, induced through auto-hypnosis. You startled me for a moment, but I can readily understand that it is nothing but the manifestation of . . ."

Dake felt a faint warning touch against his mind. He stood up quickly. "There's no time left now, Oliver. Watch my lips." *I do not speak but you can hear my words.*

His fingertips worked the tiny wheels quickly. As the moment of nothingness weakened him, he saw Oliver still sitting there, eyes bulging glassily. The phone booth was dark. He stepped quickly out into the dark tiled corridor of a locked office building. A car rumbled by outside. He stood, holding his breath, waiting for some faint touch of awareness against his mind. There was nothing. He went up the dark metal treads of the stairs. He found a doctor's office. The door was locked. He chinned himself on the top of the frame, looked through the transom. The room was faintly lighted by the reflection of the city against the night sky. He visualized the interior and then, barely in time, realized how this would be a mistake. He broke the door lock, stretched out on a couch in the inner office. He was exhausted, and sleep came before he could plan the next day.

XIII

IN THE morning Dake left the office when the building was just coming to life. The sky was gray, the air filled with the threat of thunder. He had no money. To acquire some by extra-human means would be a grave risk. On impulse he risked turning back into the office. He found a locked tin box in the receptionist's desk. He broke it under his heel, pried the lid off, pocketed the few bills and plastic coins it contained.

There was more than enough for breakfast. He found a small grubby place, picked a morning paper off the pile by the cashier's cage.

The notice of the death of Dr. Oliver Krindle was on page three, a single paragraph. "Dr. Oliver Krindle, noted psychiatrist, phoned his intention of hanging himself to the police last night, and by the time he was cut down it was too late to revive him. The suicide note stated that his long work with the insane had at last broken his mind, and that his own prognosis was unfavorable. Police report evidence that Dr. Krindle had a visitor shortly before his death, but the identity is not known at this time."

Dake ate mechanically, not noticing the taste or texture of the food. If the sanest, soundest man he knew found it impossible to accept the disconcerting proof of inhuman deviation, to accept the knowledge of skills previously limited to legend and oddly accurate fairy stories, then who would accept it? What would a group do? Check it off to the great realm of table levitation and ectoplasmic messages from Aunt Dorrie?

He remembered one of the very ancient moving pictures to which Darwin Branson had taken him. Old pictures fascinated Darwin. He remembered the one where a tramp was given a legitimate check for one million dollars. An uncertified check. He had a fortune in his hand, and no one could accept the reality of it. Just a bum with a delusion of grandeur. In the end, he had had to tear it up, or go crazy.

And he remembered a particularly infuriating incident of his youth. One summer he had gone surf casting near Marblehead, alone on the gray dawn beach, using borrowed equipment, heaving the cut bait out as far as he could, retrieving it slowly, the surf smashing against his thighs. He was using hundred pound test line. Suddenly a massive tug had yanked him off balance, nearly yanking the rod out of his hands. He clung desperately, thinking of the cost of replacing rod, reel and line. He had floundered in the surf and the reel had locked somehow. He wanted to brace him-

self and break the line, but he was yanked forward again, yanked off his feet, towed straight out with ominous speed and power. He saw at once that he would have to let the rod and reel go and swim back, or risk being drowned. Then he discovered what had locked the reel. The end of his water-soaked sweater had caught fast in the reel. He tried to rip it loose and it would not give. He had yelled in panic at the empty seascape. He was moving faster than any human could swim. The monster at the other end of the line swam steadily out, and then miraculously made a long slow turn and headed in again. It was evidently its intention to scrape the hook off on the rocks near shore. Dake at last slammed into the rocks painfully, and the line parted in that instant. He floundered to shore and sat, bleeding, panting.

It had been an exciting experience . . . until he tried to tell someone about it, experienced the blank incredulous stare, the roar of laughter. There was no proof. Nothing but wet clothes and gouged hands. You just took a tumble in the surf and thought a fish yanked on the line, boy. There's nothing in here to tow you around like that.

No one had believed him. Ever.

No one had believed in the bum with a million dollars.

No one would believe in the powers he had acquired.

And he could not use them and remain alive. Unless. . . .

In late afternoon he found what he wanted. A twenty-five year old rust bucket of a War II Liberty ship, under Panama registry, which meant, of course, Brazilian control. They signed him on as a deck hand, looking only at his powerful frame, not at the lack of identification. At dusk they wallowed slowly by the shattered base of the Statue of Liberty, heading for Jacksonville, Havana, Port au Prince, Rio. He knew that ten thousand yards was the ultimate limit of the Pack B. He knew that there had to be some limit to the space over which they could detect the psychic radiations of any extra-human application of mental force. At no time did he doubt that they would kill him if they could. It is more difficult to lie in the mind than with the lips. He wanted a chance to think. He wanted labor that would exhaust his body. He had the vague, unformed idea of taking an isolated group of people, such as the crew of the ship, and somehow forcing them to believe in what he would tell them.

The captain was a remote little man with a twitching face and two fingers missing on each hand. His name was Ryeson. The first officer ran the ship. He was a round muscular Dutchman with tangerine hair, radiation scars on his face and throat, and his name was Hagger. It was a sullen ship, a floating monument to slovenliness, dirt, unidentifiable stenches.

The next morning, cramped from the short narrow bunk, Dake was put to work by Hagger chipping paint. He and the other green hand were so elected. Dake stripped to the waist and let the June sun darken his back as he worked. As he worked monotonously he tried to organize some plan. There was one alternative. To hide for the rest of his life. Never use the new skills. Work in far places, keep quiet, let the knowledge eventually die with him. That was a remarkably unsatisfying solution. He wondered how Watkins had accepted his return to Earth. Watkins would, he guessed, conform to whatever had been asked of him, expected of him. Somewhere along the line Watkins had lost the intense need to revolt.

So lost was he in thought that he stopped working for a time, squatting on his heels, looking squinch-eyed out across the blue sea. A heavy kick in the shoulder rolled him across the greasy deck. He jumped up and faced an irate first officer.

"You take a break when I give you a break. When I don't give you a break, I want to hear that hammering."

"I'll work. But don't ever try that again, my friend."

The first officer was standing close to Dake. He glanced at the chipping hammer, shrugged and turned slowly away. He spun back, putting his weight into the spin, his meaty fist landing high on the side of Dake's face, knocking him down. As Dake tried to scramble up, the heavy kick took him in the pit of the stomach. He could see, as in a haze, the wide scarred face of the first officer grinning down at him. The foot swung back again and this time Dake, half

helpless, expected that it would catch him flush in the mouth.

Dake exerted the full thrust of control, taking over the chunky body, marching it back. He pulled himself to his feet, one arm clamped across his belly, gagging for breath. The first officer's eyes had a glazed look.

"What's going on down, there, mister?" the Captain asked, peering down from the bridge onto the boat deck. His voice was dry, puzzled.

Dake looked up, quickly released Hagger. Hagger swayed, braced himself, made a deep grunting sound in his throat and charged directly at Dake, who had to admire his single-mindedness.

Dake caught him again, and, still angered by pain, not thinking of consequences, he set Hagger off on a blundering run toward the rail. Hard thighs hit the rail and Hagger plunged forward. As he toppled into space, Dake released control. A head, orange in the sunlight, bounced in the stern wake.

A yellow life-preserver arced out from the fantail, hurled by some alert seaman who had heard the captain's surprisingly loud bellow of Man Overboard.

THEY swung a boat out, manning it in a sloppy way, and recovered the first officer. He seemed remarkably chastened. Dake went back to work. He was aware that the first officer and the captain were on the bridge, talking in low tones. He could sense their eyes on him.

"Stand up, you," the Captain said, startlingly close behind him. Dake stood up and turned. Captain Ryeson stood six feet away. He held a massive ancient automatic in a white steady hand, the muzzle pointing at Dake's belly. Dake was aware that the rest of the ship was disturbed. There was a clot of a dozen hands forty feet down the deck. The first officer stood just behind Ryeson and a bit to one side.

"Mister Hagger is going to knock you about a bit. I want to see what happens. He says you made him jump over the rail. Try that again and I'll blow a hole in you."

"You better forget the whole thing, Captain," Dake said quietly.

"A thing like that can bother a man. Go ahead, Mister Hagger. The whole crew is present."

Hagger balled his fists, licked his lips and came tentatively in toward Dake, walking uneasily.

"Forget it, please, Captain. I won't be beaten. And I won't be . . . accountable for what I'll do to stop a beating."

"I want to know what I have aboard my ship," the Captain said.

Dake was in that moment aware of the full impact of the fear and horror that normal man has for any entity which is alien. He knew that if they couldn't understand him, they would destroy him. He saw that what he should do was to cow them utterly, and quickly.

Hagger took another cautious step, his shoulders tightening. Dake's refusal to defend himself was troubling the first officer.

The Captain turned quickly and jumped back away from the maraca rattle of the tail of the coiled diamond-back. It struck at him and he fired. The slug screamed off the iron deck, high into the blue air. The snake was gone and the muzzle swung quickly toward Dake. He took over the Captain's mind, finding it tougher than the mate's, finding it a bit harder to exert control. The mate's eyes bugged as the Captain slowly put the muzzle of the gun into his mouth, closed his lips around it. Dake released the Captain, who snatched the muzzle out of his mouth, once again tried to aim at Dake. Dake made him throw the automatic over the side. Dake backed until he was braced against the bulkhead. He peopled the bridge with illustrations from the books of boyhood. Blackbeard, with twists of powder that crackled and flared and stank in his beard. Long John Silver, banging the peg leg against the bridge railing. Captain Bly, with eyes like broken ice. A dead sailor, clad in conches and seaweed. For artistic balance, he added a creature of his own devising—a duplicate of Captain Ryeson who carried under each arm, like a pair of pumpkins, two grinning heads of First Officer Hagger, the tangerine hair aflame.

And he had them all lounge against the bridge rail and look down and yell with thin, hollow, obscene laughter.

Dake turned back. The mate had gone over the rail again. The Captain stood with

his eyes closed tightly. Dake heard the ripe fruit plop of seamen going over the side, dropping into the blue sea. Several tried to lower a boat, and the lines fouled, and they went over the side.

He dispersed the illusions, seeing at once that he had gone too far. They were swimming west, away from horror, toward the faint smoky line of coast. He could control the nearest ones, but his control was not expert enough for the complicated task of swimming. Each time he would release them to avoid drowning them, they would turn like automatons and swim away from the ship. They were dwindling astern, out of his range. The Captain had fallen. His face was bluish. He died as Dake was trying to revive him. Dake ran to the wheel, tried to bring the ship around. Midway in the long arc the muted thud of driving power faltered, stopped. The heads had dwindled astern. He found the Captain's glass and steadied it. Even as he watched, powerless to help, he saw them going under, one by one. Their initial frenzy had exhaused them. The bright head of the mate, bright against the blue sea, was the last to go. And the sea was empty. He went over the ship from end to end, carefully. A cat sat on the galley table, mincingly cleaning its paws. The engine room was empty. He and the cat shared the ship. It rolled in the ground swell, and dishes clinked. Food cooled at the long table. A wisp of smoke rose from the last fragment of a cigarette. He had overestimated their capacity to absorb horror. He dragged the Captain to his cabin, tumbled him into his bunk, straightened out the dead limbs. He found the ship's safe ajar. He crammed his pockets with cash, pried fouled lines loose and managed to awkwardly lower a boat. He slid down a line and boarded it. The cranky motor started at last. He moved in numbness, in consciousness of the unpremeditated murder of twenty-one men. He thought of the one who, as he was sinking, turned and made a sign of the cross toward the devil's ship.

Blue water sparkled and danced. The boat chugged obediently toward the smear of land against the west horizon. Closer in he came on private fishing boats and gave them a wide berth. He turned south, away from an area of summer camps, away from the bright specks of colorful beach costumes, and at last found a place where he could land unobserved. The ship was out of sight, miles off the beach. This would give the world another mystery of the sea. And all he had learned, through twenty-one deaths, was that it was far too easy to overestimate the capacity of man to accept horror, particularly horror that dances in the bright sunlight.

HE drove the bow against coarse sand, leaped ashore and abandoned the boat, striking up across rough dunes, finding a narrow road. He found that he was near Poverty Beach, just north of Cape May. He walked to Wildwood. By mid-afternoon he was in Atlantic City. He bought clothing in a shoddy ersatz wool, waited for alterations. At nightfall he was on a crowded bus just entering the city limits of Philadelphia. Regret was a dull ache within him. If he had only been more restrained . . . perhaps it would have all been possible. A slow indoctrination of the men aboard the ship. Teach them the nature of the enemy.

But if Krindle had been unable to accept it, could he have ever gotten the men aboard the ship to accept it? Who would accept it? He recognized the blindness of the instinct that had taken him toward Philadelphia, toward Patrice. The inexplicable had broken her. Perhaps an explanation would heal her. She would be anxious to be healed. She had accepted the world as a jungle, believing only in her own strength. When her strength had failed her, she had no other resource. Nothing else in which she believed.

The danger, he knew, was that "they" would anticipate his need to see Patrice, would be waiting for him. Though he recognized the danger, he knew at the same time that there was nothing personal in their attitude. Perhaps they had found that some people identified themselves so closely with the known world that even, after training, they were incapable of accepting an assignment that was—in essence—merely a wry and confusing game with no discernible purpose or rules. A children's game where all were blindfolded except the agents themselves.

Dake walked tall and alone through the brawling night streets. Large areas of the city were in darkness again. He tried to telephone Patrice. It was a half hour before the call went through to the right number. He heard the distant ringing of her phone. He hung up after ten rings. At last he remembered the name of one of her lawyers, and found his home phone listing.

The lawyer was hesitant about giving her address. Dake identified himself as a Mr. Ronson from Acapulco, phoning about a hotel investment Miss Togelson had been considering.

"I suppose you could talk to her, Mr. Ronson. But she is taking no interest in business matters these days. We're handling her investments for her."

"She was very interested in this property."

"If she is still interested, we'd be very pleased. It's most difficult to please a client who . . . gives us no clue as to her wishes. She is at Glendon Farms, Mr. Ronson. It's a private convalescent home outside of Wilmington. But you won't be able to contact her tonight. Visiting hours are, I believe, in the afternoon."

Dake thanked him, hung up. He ate from a sense of duty, not hunger, and found a cheap hotel room. He lay on the bed in the darkened room and thought of his motives in trying to see Patrice. To find just one person who would accept, who would believe, who could be made to look at the shape of the enemy. . . .

To have suffered these incredible alterations was to become desolately lonely. He had never been particuarly dependent on emotional attachments. But to have the certain knowledge that to human man he was an object of fear and dread, and to extra-human man a rebel to be immediately eliminated—it gave him a sense of apartness that shocked him, it was so unexpected. He could go to a bar, and force himself into some group, and talk all night, without ever saying anything.

He knew, then, that the only true intimacy of the spirit was that intimacy possible only with those who had been trained as he had been trained. Only with those who had learned to focus and direct that vast incredible energy of the brain cells. With all untrained humans he would have to be like a civilized man who has gone to live among savages. He could go native, but it would be a denial of his abilities. He would take to that savage tribe a knowledge of customs and abilities beyond their power to conceive, let alone understand. And never would he be able to forget the thought of waste, of dispersal of power, of abnegation of destiny.

The closest friendship he had ever experienced had been with Watkins during the brief training period. In trust and friendship they had lowered screens, permitting an exchange of thought subject to no semantic distortion. It had been easier, more relaxing, to use speech rather than para-voice, but in any particularly difficult concept, where there was a misunderstanding, para-voice had been available. The thought changed itself into the words the listener would have used to express the exact shade of meaning.

Maybe, he thought, the agents were right. If a man could not accept the implications of training, he might be better off dead. Death could be no greater loneliness than this knowledge that you were forever cut off from other minds attuned to yours in a way that, once experienced, became forever necessary.

But he could not reconcile himself to defeatism. The answer was clear. Make Patrice understand, and she would divert all her resources to the task of making the world see what was happening, what apparently had been happening for years without end.

Perhaps untrained man could find a way to fight them, to keep them from toying like careless children with the destiny of man. But the first job was to expose.

He thought of the heads of swimming men, grotesquely tiny against the wide flat sea. He thought of those who would be waiting, in delicate awareness, for some indicative display of his new abilities, then using that detectable emanation to track him down, with an objective, functional mercilessness.

And he was honest enough with himself to wonder if he would have revolted against them if Karen had met him with the warmth he had expected of her.

XIV

A NURSE with a wide, heavy, placid face met him at the door of Patrice's cottage on the fenced grounds of Glendon Farms and took his visitor's card and asked him politely to follow her. Her starched uniform rustled, and it was blinding in the sun.

There was a long slope behind the cottage, down to a small formal garden. Patrice lay on a dark blue blanket spread on the tailored grass. She wore a brief black sunsuit.

The nurse paused with him, out of earshot, and said, "Please don't say anything to distrub or excite her. If you see her beginning to get nervous, call me. I'll wait here."

Dake walked down to her. Patrice was face down, her back deep gold in the sunlight. He sat on his heels beside the blanket and said, "Patrice?"

She turned quickly, raising herself on her elbows, a sheaf of the bright hair masking her eye for a moment before she threw it back with a toss of her head.

"Dake, darling," she said warmly. "How good to see you!"

"You look well, Patrice."

"I'm very well, dear."

He studied her, curiously. There was something subtly wrong about her face, about her expression. A bland childishness. Her mouth and eyes were soft, but something had gone, utterly. He saw what it was. There was no firmness, no resolution, no strength of will or character left.

"Patrice," he said uneasily, "do you remember the . . . last time we saw each other?"

"That night when I got sick? They told me you were there, dear. Was I too awful?"

"No. I mean, you weren't really sick, Patrice. You just saw something you couldn't explain to yourself. But I could explain it to you."

She glanced up to where the nurse stood fifty feet away, dead white against the green of the clipped grass.

She said in a low tone, "Don't let her know that I wasn't really sick. They're doing this for the money."

"What do you mean?"

She gave him a childish smile. "Don't be dull. If they find out I know what their little game is, they'll kill me. You certainly know that." Her voice was perfectly calm, matter-of-fact.

"What . . . do you plan to do?"

"Oh, there are too many of them! I can't do anything. You know that! But I have to let them all think I believe them. They give me warnings, you know. They put electricity in my head, and keep telling me it's going to help me, but it's just a warning about how they'll kill me if I don't do exactly what they say. Now you're in here and they won't let you out either. Because now you know, and you could tell about what they're doing. You were silly to come here, Dake, dear. Terribly silly. There are too many of them."

"Patrice, I . . ."

She sat up all the way and her voice became shrill, and her eyes were filled with sharp excitement. "Run, Dake! Run before the men come!"

The nurse came quickly down the lawn. Dake stood up and backed away from Patrice. The nurse said, "Now lie down and get some more sun, Patrice. That's a good girl."

Patrice smiled at her and stretched out obediently. She yawned and closed her eyes, said in a sleepy mumble, " 'By, Dake, darling."

He walked back to the cottage with the nurse. "How is she?"

The nurse shrugged. "She'll improve for a time, and then retrogress overnight. There seems to be something, some memory she won't face up to. She's had two full series of shock treatments. They seem to help for a time, but the effects aren't lasting. She's sweet, really. Mild and cooperative. We never have to use restraint, except when she realizes she's due for another shock treatment. She thinks she's some sort of a prisoner here. That isn't uncommon, you know."

"She always had such . . . enormous energy."

"She seems quite content to vegetate, sir. That is common, too. A complete avoiding of decisions, or the reasons for making any."

He went back to Philadelphia, back to

the cheap room. Branson might have understood. He was gone. Patrice was gone. Oliver Krindle was gone. In a sense, Karen was gone.

He sat on the corner of the desk, lean ankles crossed, and tried to plot his future actions. "They" would be spread quite thin. There would be many places in the world, many places in this country, where he'd be out of range, free to work out some plan of what to do with the rest of his life.

Someone had to believe! Odd, how important that had become. He could not risk it with anyone he had known. It would have to be a stranger. Someone carefully selected. And the demonstration of his abilities would have to be carried on where the chance of detection was remote.

HE WALKED in the city, looking at faces, looking into the eyes of strangers with an intentness that made them uneasy. His training had made faces more readable. He saw shallow concerns, and fear, and aimlessness. He walked long miles through the city.

He found no one in whose stability he could believe. At dusk he walked out on the rusting mass of the Delaware River Bridge, wondering if all the cities would be like this, if there would not be a face in all the world to trust, instinctively.

The bridge lights were out and the girl was a vague gray shadow a dozen yards away. There was a pale hint of her face, and then she began to climb the parapet. He ran as quickly and silently as he could. She heard him and tried to move more quickly. He caught a thin wrist, pulled her firmly back and down to stand by him, his arm around her slim body. She stood very quietly, her head bowed, trembling slightly.

"Are you certain you want to do that?"

"Yes." It was a whisper, barely audible.

He took out a match, struck it, shielding it from the fitful wind, tilting her chin up calmly to study her face. It was a young face, haggard, frail, vulnerable. She turned away from him.

"I'll do it anyway," she said. "Sooner or later."

"The reason is good?"

"Of course."

"I won't try to question you about it. I'll accept that. Your reason is good. Do you have a name?"

"Mary."

"Suppose you were given a chance to do something . . . that might be constructive, and then be permitted, later, to destroy yourself. Would that interest you?"

"Constructive. That seems an odd word for you to use." Her voice was low, the inflexion good, articulation crisp, clean.

"You would have to take it on faith. I can't explain, yet."

"Hold a light by your face. I want to look at you."

He lit another match. She looked up at him. "The heavy sorrow of all the world," she said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"In your face. In your eyes. I work . . . used to work, in wood and stone and clay, and anything else that will take a form." In the last dusk light he saw her hold her hands out, clench her fists. "Your face would fit a heroic figure. There aren't many faces left like that. It's a good face. Do you have a name?"

"Dake."

"I'll do what you want. But no questions. Will it take long?"

"A week, perhaps less. I don't know."

"I didn't know it would take that long."

"I have to tell you one thing, Mary. You have to be a person who . . . has very little to lose."

"I have one question. Is it something criminal?"

"No."

"All right. But first you better buy me something to eat. I'm pretty shaky, Dake."

In the small, lamp-lit restaurant he had his first chance to look at her. Her hair was straight, dark, worn rather long. She wore a gray suit, a white blouse, both of casual good quality, but rumpled. She wore no makeup. He sensed her lack of pretense and vanity. She had a style of her own, a directness. It was her hands that interested him most. Good square firm hands, with short, competent-looking fingers. They were as immaculate as a surgeon's.

She ate with controlled hunger, with the delicate precision of a starved house cat. He sat, smoking, and watched her.

At last he said, "I'm not asking ques-

tions about you. But in order to explain my position, I have to refer it to your customary frames of reference. Otherwise I might make myself meaningless to you. How do you . . . think about life, about the place of man in his environment?"

She made a face over her sip of substitute coffee. "Man," she said, "as a free spirit, has never had the freedom he deserves in his environment. He just drifts from one collectivism to the next. Taboos change—lack of freedom of expression is a constant."

"What causes his lack of freedom?"

She shrugged. "Ignorance, I suppose. Superstitions. The yen for the master-slave relationship. Or maybe plain bullheaded perversity. Let any person stand out as an individual, and the herd pulls him down and tramples him."

"Progress?"

"We wiggle back and forth in a groove, like a phonograph needle. But on a flat surface."

"What if that's the plan?"

"Are you being a mystic?"

"No. Suppose it is an arbitrary plan, a definite suppression, for an unknown reason?"

"Presumably, then, by some definite entity, some thinking aura or fire-ball or nine-legged Venusian?"

"By men who have been trained in . . . abilities you would think impossible."

She clapped her hands once. "What a lovely excuse for all defeatism! We can't possibly get anywhere because we're . . . breeding stock, or something. A rather poorly-run stock farm, I might add."

"I have been trained on another planet."

She stared hard at him in a long silence. She picked up her spoon, put it down again. "This is where I should say I'm Mary, Queen of Scots, I suppose."

"If you'd like."

"They say madmen come in the most credible shapes and forms. I'm supposed to be mad, too. Suicidal. By the way, did you know the list of living creatures who do away with themselves? Lemmings, of course. That's common, And man, bless him. A scorpion, when infuriated beyond reason will sting himself to death. And there is a species of white butterfly that flies straight out to sea. Those are the non-functional deaths, as opposed to the dying of, say, the male spider, or the winged ant. Yet . . . somehow I cannot believe that either of us is mad, Dake." She smiled and took a small glossy photograph from her pocket, slid it across the table to him.

He picked it up and looked at it. It was a photograph of a carving, in some dark wood, of a starving child. Spindle limbs, bloated belly, the expression of dull acceptance, without either pain or fear.

She said quietly, "I wasn't going to tell you. I planned not to. I've been working too hard. I've been doing too many things which . . . disturb my public. Apparently I've been critical. And criticism is a Disservice. Yesterday they came with a writ. They smashed my work. Every last bit of it. Hauled it away. Gave me an appointment with the Local Board for this afternoon. I didn't keep it. Suicide isn't a gesture of protest. Not in my case, Dake. It is very simply a statement. I refuse to permit myself to live in my environment. Am I mad?"

"I . . . don't think so?"

"I'm not afraid of labor. I'm not afraid of being sentenced. You must believe that."

"I do."

She lifted her chin with an oddly touching pride. "I've never been afraid of anything that walks, creeps, or crawls."

"For myself, I would qualify that."

"How?"

"I've been frightened, but never afraid."

She tilted her head on one side. "I rather like that, Dake. Now what do you do with this training? Spread your filmy green wings and take off? Forgive me for sounding so flip. The food, I guess. Intoxicating after so long. I ate yesterday, before they came. That was the last time."

He leaned forward a bit. "You see, I have to make someone believe me."

"Or cease believing in it yourself? Maybe it's necessary for you to keep believing in it."

"That sounds like you're thinking of insanity again."

"Blame me?"

"No. But I want you to be . . . objective about proof."

"Start proving."

"I can't. Not here. I can't even tell you why I can't do it here. It will sound like a persecution complex running wild. If you're through, we'll leave. We're going to fly west."

"By flapping our arms? Oh, forgive me! I feel right on the edge of tears or hysteria or something. Let's get out of here."

THEY sat in the deep comfortable seats of a CIJ flagship awaiting takeoff. Dake noticed that, under the terminal floods, the stairs had been wheeled back into position. Two men boarded the plane and came down the aisle toward them. Mary made a small sound, like a whimper. He saw the pale flat expressionless faces of Disservice agents, saw that they were staring at Mary, saw the eyes of the lead one widen as he glanced at Dake. A pink tongue flecked quickly at pale lips, and the hand slid inside the neat dark jacket.

He thought quickly. Takeoff was already seconds behind schedule. The Indian copilot glared at his watch.

Dake closed his hand over her thin wrist. "I have to demonstrate sooner than I wanted to," he said, barely moving his lips.

It would be too puzzling to the other passengers if the two men, whose profession was so obvious, should turn and leave the aircraft without a word. He selected a man across the aisle, an overdressed toothy man with a shyster look. He saw dullness replace alertness as he enfolded their minds in his will, thrusting volition aside ruthlessly. They turned, their movements awkward and poorly coordinated, and grasped the toothy man and hoisted him roughly out of the seat.

"Hey!" the man yelped. "Hey, what are you doing?"

Dake made them shove and thrust him up the aisle. He had to stand to see the wheeled steps. The struggling victim made the task difficult. The balance could not be maintained, and the three of them tumbled down the steps. The victim got up, was grasped again, and marched off toward the main terminal buildings, across the concrete apron.

The steps were wheeled away, the doors slammed and latched. The jets flared and roared, and quickly faded into silence as the flagship, turning above the city, arrowing upward, passed the sonic barrier. He realized he still had hold of Mary's wrist. He relased it. She was looking up at him, her eyes unfrightened.

"They were coming after us, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"They wanted you too. I saw it in their eyes."

"Yes."

"You hypnotized them. I could see it in their walk. Such an odd walk. Will they . . . stay that way long?"

"As soon as they were out of range, they got over it."

"Won't they have the tower call the plane back?"

"I don't think so. They don't like to inconvenience CIJ in any way. And I know how their minds work. That man. I had to pick him quickly. They won't be able to explain what they did, or why. So they'll take particular pains to find some recent act of that man which can be classed as a Disservice. I'd be willing to bet that they'll report that you weren't on the plane. And they'll conveniently ignore having seen me. Any failure of a Disservice agent is in itself classed as a Disservice to the State, you know."

"Then we're safe?"

"From the Disservice agents. But not from . . . another group."

"Who are they?"

Do you believe me when I say I was trained on another planet?

"Yes, Dake, I . . . How in the world did you do that?"

In this world but not of it, Mary.

"Hold my wrist again. Hold it tightly. Hurt me with your hand."

"Why?"

"I have to believe that I didn't go off that bridge. I have to believe that all this isn't happening in some . . . gray place between the last life and the next."

He held her wrist tightly, made her gasp with pain. She smiled. "That's better, a little."

"The other group . . . they are the people who have been trained in the same things. I think they control the world. I

can't make myself believe in . . . their motives. I think they are evil. And apparently, the penalty for misplaced loyalty is death."

"Wasn't there a myth about a god who left Olympus, who preferred to live with man?"

"Men hate gods and fear them. I learned that quickly."

"I don't fear you. I don't hate you. There's just . . . a very definite awe. Can the others . . . find you?"

"They may be there when this plane lands. The first stop is Denver. So there isn't much time for us."

"What else can you do?"

"What did we do while we were waiting for the plane?"

She frowned. "Walked, talked."

"Did we?"

He took over her mind quickly. The life left her eyes. Her hands rested flaccid in her lap. He gave her a better memory. He brought the memory up out of the good years. A great glittering ballroom, open to the sky. An orchestra, playing for the two of them. He dressed her in silver blue, a dress sheathed perfectly to the uncompromising perfection of her body. Music of Vienna, and a sky with too many stars, and the long dance as he looked down into her eyes.

After a time he released her. Her eyes focused on his with a slow fondness, and then she gave a little shudder and flushed.

"Lovely, Dake. But like dancing in a dream. Light, effortless. I always trample on my partner's feet."

"But it was real, Mary. You believe it happened. So it happened."

She nodded, solemn as a child. "It happened."

"Would you like more magic?"

"Much more. All there is."

"Look at your hands."

He had covered her fingers with great barbaric rings, with the emeralds and fire diamonds of illusion. She touched the stones.

"They . . . exist."

"Of course. But all magic isn't gay." He dissolved all the rings but one, an emerald. He turned it into a small green snake curled tightly around her finger, its head lifted, eyes unwinking, forked crimson tongue flickering.

She flinched violently and then held her hand steady, stared at it calmly. "Magic doesn't have to be gay. It has only to be . . . magic."

"Do you believe?"

"In legend, Dake, it was necessary for you to sell your soul to the devil to be able to do this."

"I refused to sell. That's why there is a forfeit I have to pay."

"The same forfeit I'm paying voluntarily. When you're through with me." She bit her lip and said, "I'm like a child with a new toy. I don't want it taken away from me. Those two men back there—will they remember what happened?"

"Not what happened while I was controlling them. Just before and after."

"Would the crew of one of these liners admit they had made an unauthorized landing?

"They . . . might not, but . . ."

"Can you control all the passengers?"

"Not at the same time. I can put them to sleep, one by one, and give them a strong suggestion to remain asleep. But I can't fly one of these things. I can't therefore control the man flying it."

"Could you make him believe he'd heard orders to land somewhere else, the way you made me believe in that . . . dance?"

He thought it over. "That might be done. It's a case of erasing the memory later, though."

THERE had once been a vast bomber base near Cheyenne Wells. One strip was kept lighted as an emergency strip. The flagship rolled to a stop. Sweat stood on Dake's forehead with intensity of his effort, with the diversification of it. He got the doors open. It was a thirty-foot drop to the hard surface. All around them the passengers slept. Up forward the crew slept, heavily.

They walked on their toes inside the plane, talked in whispers. Dake let the emergency ladder down, climbed down and held the bottom steady as Mary clambered down.

A light came bobbing and winking toward them. A heavy man in khaki came

out of the shadows. "What goes on here?" he asked.

Dake wasted no time on him. He took him over with punishing abruptness, made him stand aside, his eyes glassy. He took Mary by the hand and they ran across the runway. He turned and looked back at the aircraft, at the lighted control room. The crew stirred, came awake, looked around.

Dake and Mary ran and hid in the grass, watchful. After a time the flagship wheeled ponderously around, raced down the runway, lifted toward the stars.

XV

IN THE desert the nights were cool, and dry, the days crisp, blinding. It was a miner's shack, abandoned when the claim was worked out. Mary drove into town eight miles away once a week for supplies. Fuel was a problem, water was a problem, money would soon be a problem. But each day was an idyl, each night pale silver with too many stars. They would sit on an outcropping of rock, still warm from the sun of the day. He would wonder where he had been—which exact portion of the big sky.

She wore jeans and white shirts and went barefoot gingerly until her slim feet were brown and toughened. The sun bleached the ends of her hair, whitened her brows and lashes, and turned her face a deep ruddy brown. He liked to watch her. She had a cat's grace, a cat's ability to relax utterly. They walked miles across the harsh burned land. They talked of all things under the sun.

Mary never tired of making him perform. The tiny Pack B fascinated her. He taught her the sequence of wheels, tried to teach her how to use it. She tried until she was on the edge of tears, saying, "I can't get rid of that last tiny little feeling that it's impossible. If I could only accept it completely . . . Do it again, Dake. Let me watch again."

And finally she refused to try any more. Her smile seemed a bit strained.

There was another game. She would say, "I met this one when I was studying in Sarasota right after the war. About five foot six, a hundred and seventy pounds, I'd say. Balding, with very silky blonde hair. Big bland blue eyes, and a snub nose and a puckery little mouth, and two chins. He stood very straight, with his stomach sticking out, and when he was thinking of how he would explain something, he'd suck his teeth. He used to wear white slacks and a beaded belt and dark shirts with short sleeves, navy or black."

"Like this?"

And she would clasp her hands with sudden delight, or she would frown and say, "He's wrong, somehow. Let me think. It's the forehead."

And he would alter the illusion until she was satisfied, and he would fix the man in his memory, ready to reproduce him at any time she desired. Once they had a party. He produced the illusions of a round dozen of the people she had described. He created them to the extent of his abilities, sitting taut with the strain of managing so many of them. And Mary walked among them, burlesqueing the considerate hostess, saying outrageous things to them.

And suddenly she began to laugh, and she sat down on the sand, and laughter turned to tears, her face huddled against her knees. He dissolved the illusions and went to her, kneeling beside her, touching her shoulder.

"What is it?"

She lifted her wet face and tried to smile. "I . . . don't know. It's a crazy thing. I started feeling as though I'm . . . here with you like a favorite puppy, or an amusing kitten or something. And what you were doing was like throwing a ball for me to fetch it back to you, panting and wagging my tail."

"Not like that."

"Dake, what are we doing here?"

"I had to have someone accept what I could do. Take it without fear and without horror. It seemed necessary to find someone, to find you."

"But I'm shut out, aren't I? I'm . . . like that puppy."

"How honest do you want me to be?"

She was solemn. "All the way, Dake."

"I have a feeling of guilt, about the things I can do and you can't. Guilt makes me resent the fact that you can't. I'm dissatisfied with your lack of ability."

"I'll be honest too. I envy you. And it's

a very small step from envy to resentment, from resentment to hate. I keep saying to myself, 'Why did they take him? Why did they train him? Why wasn't it me?' Do you see?"

"Yes, I see, Mary. I've told you . . . every part of the story. Every part of my life, I guess. You know how it happened."

"I know how it happened. And I've watched you, Dake. I've watched you sitting, staring at nothing, that puzzled look on your face. You haven't told me the whole thing, have you?"

He sat back on his heels, picked up a handful of sunhot sand, let it slide through his fingers. He said, "These weeks here . . . it's the first breathing space I've had. The first time to think. My mind goes around and around in a crazy circle and then always ends up flat against a paradox that I can't solve, can't see around. A featureless thing like a wall."

"I think I know what it is, Dake. You tell me."

HE PICKED up more sand, tossed aside irritably. "Just this. The mind and the spirit are perhaps . . . indivisible. On Training T, I was trained by humans, in an alien series of mental techniques. Their method of conquering space, this Pack B, the buildings and methods I saw—all those came from some alien technology far superior to anything on earth. But their greatest advances are in the realm of the brain, and its great unused power. If the mind and the spirit are . . . instead, I guess I should say the mind and the soul . . . if they are indivisible, I think that any increment in the power to use the mind would presuppose a greater understanding of the human soul. And if that is true, why is the influence of the trained ones inimical to mankind? Greater knowledge should mean greater understanding. So why haven't they made of Earth a decent, safe, sane place to live. I know that with the powers I have, if I could be the only man on Earth with these powers, I could lead this planet into the greatest period of prosperity and peace it has ever seen. If I could do it, by crumbling away the rotten spots, reinforcing the good spots, why don't *they* do it? I certainly have no corner on good will. I saw the people trained at the same time I was. I saw them change. I saw an ignorant Spanish gypsy girl change utterly from a person who functioned on the instinctual animal level to a person who began to have sound, sincere abstract thoughts and concepts. I've labeled the entire operation as something evil. And I doubt whether my label is . . . accurate. I have the feeling of some chance slipping away from me."

"I've had that feeling for some time, Dake."

"Then what is the answer?"

"There has to be some answer to that you haven't seen yet."

"Then why didn't they tell me the answer?"

"Maybe you had to decide it for yourself. Maybe they gave you enough clues."

He smiled crookedly. "Then I should keep thinking?"

"Of course. And if you find the answer, you should go back." She stood up, brushing the sand from herself. "Walk?"

"Sure."

'Make me a mirage, Dake."

'What kind?"

"On that hill. Something cool. Something inviting."

He made heavy old trees and black shade and a limpid fountain. She took his hand and they walked across the desert floor.

"Not a puppy," he said suddenly. "Something special. Something I need. Patrice had a portion of it, once. Karen had some of it. Even the gypsy had some of it. I don't know how to tell you what it is. Strength and warmth. The strong people never seem to be warm enough. The warm people too often have wills like suet. My wife was . . . right. So are you. I love you."

"Scratch me behind the ear and throw a ball and I'll fetch."

"Stop that!"

"Don't you see? Remember what they told you when you were learning arithmetic? You can't add apples and oranges. You have to change the bottom halves of fractions before you can add them together. I can't become like you. You can't retrogress to me. I'll be around as long as you want me, but my attitude will be . . . sacrificial."

"That's a hell of a thing to say."

"I want you to realize your 'apartness.'

You can't love a human except condescendingly. You want desperately for me to be able to insert my thoughts into your mind, as you can into mine. But I can't. So we'll never have the sort of communication that you depend on, that you have learned to depend upon. Without that, I'm just a warm, articulated doll. Press the right switch and I'll say, 'I love you, Dake.' Flat and metallic and mechanical. But I cannot ever say it . . . in your way."

"But you do?"

"Of course. Puppies have a traditional attachment to their masters. A revolting adoration."

In anger he walked rigidly ahead. He glanced back and she was standing quite still, watching him. He turned and climbed across brown rock.

Look out! Snake!

He caught the glint of sun on diamond coils and jumped wildly away, feeling the faint brush of blunt head and fangs against the leg of his trousers. It was a gigantic rattler, as big around as his upper arm. He moved warily away from it. It coiled, then turned slowly and slid, like oiled death, off into the raw brown rock.

It was only then, his heart still thudding, that he realized the implication of what had happened. He turned and looked at the girl, a hundred feet away. She stood with her chin up, her arms pressed tightly against her sides.

He walked slowly down toward her, faced her. Her expression told him nothing.

"That night on the bridge?"

"I was never far from you, Dake, from the moment you left Glendon Farms."

There was a sick taste in his throat. "So I'm an assignment. Is that it?"

"Yes. I should have risked shouting. I didn't think of it. Para-voice was quicker and . . . it saved you. I could only think of saving you."

"Will you explain . . . everything to me?"

"Let's go back."

They walked in silence to the shack. They sat on the ground in the intense desert shade, in the dry coolness.

He laughed flatly. "I must have been pretty amusing, showing you all my little tricks."

"Quite sweet, actually. A strain, though, not using my screens for so very long."

"That's a nice word. Sweet. And you were a sweet puppy, Mary."

"Get all the bitterness out of your system, Dake."

"And very amusing that the subject of your assignment fell in love with you."

"Are you through?"

"What is it all about?"

"YOU were studied very carefully. There's a paradox you don't know about. Those who barely manage to get through without cracking are the ones who are eventually the most valuable. Take the gypsy. She withstood it easily. And she very probably will never go beyond Stage One. It is the borderline ones who eventually become the Stage Threes. You will be a Stage Three some day, Dake. I know I'll never go beyond Stage Two. So you see, you are rare and valuable."

"Thank you," he said, with irony.

"It was Karen's duty to start you running. She did it very neatly indeed. You weren't as much afraid of death as you were afraid of dying without ever knowing what Watkins called the ultimate answer."

"Why was I supposed to run?"

"Because there is an attitude which you will have to maintain for many years. It can't be superimposed on you, without limiting your effectiveness. It is a balance and a philosophy that you have to acquire by yourself. Only then are you ready for assignment. You have acquired a large measure of that philosophy here on the desert, with me."

"This philosophy has dimensions? Standard parts?"

"They vary for the individual, Dake. One of the primary attitudes, however, is an awareness and appreciation of 'apartness.' I think you have that. Man hates and fears deviation, and will destroy it if he can. Thus your relationship to man, in your role of induced mutation, must be in somewhat of the nature of parent to child."

"I've felt that. A . . . pity. A remoteness."

"You can achieve identification with only those of your children who can be induced to aspire to . . . adulthood. You are a true adult."

"With a pretty callous attitude toward the children?"

"There has to be a lot of attrition, a continual thinning of the ranks in order that others may grow."

"Why?"

"What would the answer to that question be?"

He thought for a moment. "Would it be Watkins' ultimate answer?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Running, as you have been. Maybe he is back by now. Running, not from the fear of death, but from the fear of never knowing."

"Can you tell me the answer?"

She looked at him for a long time. "I have to know if you're ready, Dake. I have to know if you can accept it. Take my hands."

They turned, facing each other. Her lips moved quietly, "Screens down, Dake."

He was utterly lost in her eyes. Gone. Taken into some warm place. Taken into secret depths of oneness, of togetherness, of warmth, that he had never imagined could exist. This was a closeness far beyond that which could ever be achieved by the body. This was a spiritual mating, a clinging and mingling of souls, a high, wild, hard emotional experience that was beyond space and time . . .

Then he was aware that they were releasing each other, that they were separating slowly into separate entities.

"I've wanted that for so long," she said gently. Her voice trembled. Her eyes were brimming. "I knew it would be . . . right."

"Am . . . I ready?"

Her lips twisted. "Your ultimate answer will be anti-climax, Dake. Now."

"I think I can sense that. Maybe the obvious is always an anti-climax."

She stood up lightly. "No, stay there. This is history, Dake. Human history. History of galactic man, and his adjustment to his environment, and his answer to decadence. There is more than a hundred thousand years of recorded history. Some day you will learn more of it. It is part of Stage Two training. The heart worlds grew and learned and warred on each other, and combined, and found peace, and added to systems as they achieved cultural maturity. themselves those other planets and star Each manlike cultural system made its own contributions to the whole. For the sake of simplicity, we shall call the entire unity Empire. Examine that word manlike. If I had a complete adjustment, I would not use that word. Physiological deviations are small throughout the galaxy. We are all men. You saw several varieties on Training T."

"Acting a bit . . . servile."

"OF COURSE. One cultural group, part of the unity of Empire, is called the Senarian. It was that group which carried mathematical calculation to the inevitable pitch where it can make a sound prediction of the future. Perfection of extrapolation, the inevitable end result of all mathematical science. The parsing of time. Many thousand years ago the calculations of the Senarians were directed at a problem which was growing more serious. It had started in a very subtle way. It was noticed that, as new cultures were added to the unity of Empire, there followed a period when the top administrative jobs of Empire, the crucial decision-making positions, were all manned by citizens of the most recent culture to join Empire.

"After a few generations of the peace and sanity of membership in Empire, the descendants of the newest culture would lose their competitive drive, and no longer be of valid worth for leadership purposes. This was not a pressing problem so long as there were a sufficient number of barbaric cultures forging ahead toward Empire leadership, as they would provide the future leadership, the future vitality which would avoid stagnation. But, the Senarians asked their vast computers, what will happen when there is no longer such a supply?

"The answer was disheartening to Empire. Leadership cannot come from any environment where there is peace and plenty. Leadership can only be developed in an environment where there is conflict, savagery, violence, hate. Leadership is the answer to a competitive environment. Empire is not a competitive environment. Empire will eventually be without leadership. Progress will cease.

"The computers were asked a second level question. What will be the result of the cessation of progress. The answer was destruction.

"Destruction by life forms of neighboring galaxies. Life forms so alien that there could be no communication. Only through progress could there be a continual increment of strength sufficient to keep the species alive.

"A third question was asked. What can be done? The answer took much longer. And the logic of it was inevitable. Keep one planet in a barbaric state. Keep it in continual conflict. Permit it no knowledge of the existence of Empire, and no knowledge of its function. Do not permit it to destroy itself.

"Deny it space travel. Keep it in insane and continual conflict and that planet will provide you with your leadership. Take those men and women who rise to the top of the boiling pot, and skim them off, and train them, and use them."

He stared at her in the silence. "Then all this . . . all this that has tortured men for thousands of years . . . it is just a . . . trick? A breeding ground? A training ground?"

She looked at him proudly "More than that, Dake. Much more than that. Earth is the heart of Empire. The ruler. The destiny of the galaxy. Men of earth rule all the countless stars. They rule justly, firmly, ruthlessly.

"Under the leadership of Earth, Empire moves on up the infinite ladder of progress, up to a strength that will keep us free forever."

"Why was Earth selected?"

"Because here man was stronger than elsewhere. His natural environment had been harsher, gravity stronger than the norm, climate more extreme, nature more violent."

"But I . . ."

"No more, Dake. Not now. You have to think over what I've told you. You have to understand how you must transfer your loyalty from Earth man to Galactic man. But transfer it with an increment in pride in Earth, and in yourself. I will talk to you later, after you have had a chance to think it over."

XVI

HE WALKED alone, and did not know where he walked, or how far. He stood on a hilltop and watched the sun slide red behind the far blue line of the mountains. It made such a complete reversal of all his concepts, of all his adjustments to the political and emotional climate of his environment, that he felt as though someone had taken his brain between two hard hands, and twisted it like a sponge.

There was no segment of his beliefs that did not need reorganization, re-evaluation.

Earth had a history. There were names in that history. Alexander, Hannibal, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini. And, he thought, Christ. And Buddha and Mohammed and Vishna. Good and evil, fighting an endless battle, to a predestined draw. Keep the pot boiling. Keep the four horsemen riding across the ravaged lands. A million men broken and burned and dying for each one selected. Massive, callous, mathematical cruelty, for the sake of . . . the greatest good for the greatest number.

He sat on the hilltop rocks and watched the stars come out, watched the quick desert night fall like a curtain. Men of Earth, being led in a crazy dance of death, for the sake of the high wide ballroom of the skies.

He heard Mary's foot touch a loose stone. She came up behind him. He did not turn. He felt the soft warm pressure of her hand on his shoulder.

I know how difficult it is.

What is the final adjustment? What do I feel, afterward?

"Joy, Dake. Gladness. Pride. Humility. All the best attributes of the human spirit."

"Will you answer questions? I've been thinking in circles again."

"Of course."

"Why did I have to be sent back here?"

"Assignment here is part of your training for your future responsibilities. Part of your training in logic, in analysis, in action, and in humility. When your work is valid, you will be credited for it. After you have acquired enough credits, you will be given Stage Two training and returned here. Later, perhaps, you will be accepted for Stage Three training. After three tours here you

will be assigned to the post in Empire that you are best qualified for."

"How long will I have to be here?"

"That depends on your progress. Twenty-five to thirty of their years."

"Their years?"

"Earth years. Two and a half to three of ours, basing it on effect of time."

"I want to gloat about that. And feel guilty. That's a very precious gift."

"But not mystic. Just one logical result of an advanced medical science. A continuation of the trend you've seen here on earth."

"Another question. There are two groups, apparently, or more. In conflict with each other. I don't see why that should be necessary, or even advisable."

"Is any untrained man a fair match for you?"

"N-No, but . . ."

"Did any man ever play a great game of chess, alone?"

"No."

"Conflict breeds ingenuity. Competition, also, gives a more random result, one that is less predictable, less likely to be detected by the ordinary thinking man as the result of extraterrestrial interference. You get credit for accomplishment, pay, as Karen did, a penalty for failure. And always you must watch. You watch the top people in every possible line of endeavor. The most successful crooks, as Miguel Larner was. The best statesmen, the best politicians, the best artists, designers, salesmen, engineers. People at the top of every heap got there through conflict, through a compensation for some type of psychic trauma. They, if the incomprehensible doesn't drive them mad, become our best recruits."

"Why wasn't Darwin Branson recruited? He was killed, wasn't he?"

"He had an organic disorder that was too far advanced for treatment. It would have killed him within six months. Besides, it was only during the last three years of his life that he achieved more than a pedestrian impact on his environment. So he wasn't noticed until too late."

Dake absorbed that in silence. He stirred restlessly. She sat on the rocks beside him.

"There are so many loyalties to give up," he said. "Loyalty to my country. That was pretty strong, you know. And now I can see that its weakness is due to what . . . we have done to it."

"THAT word was good to hear. It's an acceptance. Here is something you should consider. The number of recruits we obtain from any one country is in direct ratio to the extent of hardship that country is undergoing. During India's years of poverty and exploitation and death we obtained many recruits there. During the fattest years of the United States it was difficult to find people sufficiently toughened, hardened. Sword steel is treated in flame. Civilizations rise and fall. Those on top are poor breeding grounds for leadership. See, you have to reverse all your concepts, Dake. Good becomes weakness. Evil becomes strength."

"And isn't it all a vast rationalization?"

"So is the life form itself. A rationalization of the means of survival."

They walked back to the shack, walking in the starlight that silvered the sand underfoot. A coyote cried far away, cried of unmentionable woes and wrongs. He felt the girl shiver.

"We'll start back in the morning," he said quietly.

"In the morning, Dake."

They stood for a time and watched the stars, near the dark hulk of the shack. He held her hand, felt her mind touch gently at his. They stood again in the climactic oneness, and later he began to feel the first faint stirrings of dedication, the first wary reachings toward a philosophy that would have to support him, amid cruelty, for long years of service to a barely comprehensible dream.

XVII

THE cab driver was sweaty, irritable and talkative. "Guess you folks have been out west. I can tell by that tan. You don't get that kind of tan here in summer, or in Florida, or anywhere except out there. It's been a hot August here. Wet. I wish I was back out where it's dry heat."

"It's more comfortable," Mary said.

"You bet your elbow it is, lady. This town goes nuts in the summer. All the rummies start sleeping in the parks. Bunch of pronies running around cutting up people.

Another fleng joint war, with them throwing bombs in each other's joints. What a month! You hear the knock in this thing? I'm running it on kerosene, and damn poor kerosene at that."

The driver cursed and swerved wildly to avoid a big Taj full of Pak-Indian tourists. "Think they own the damn world," he said viciously. He shrugged, arguing with himself. "Maybe they do, come to think of it."

"Have there been many tourists around this summer?" Dake asked.

"Too many, if you ask me. I don't know why they come over here. I got a pal with connections. He's all lined up to emigrate. Going to run a hack in Bombay, with a Sikh partner. He's never had it so good. They got those quotas so tight, it's almost impossible to get in over there."

"You'd like to do the same thing?"

The man turned in the seat and gave him an angry glare. "Why not? What is there here? Three days a week I get fuel. I get four deadheads for every tipper. I don't even own this hack. Where's the opportunities here? I ask you that. When I was a kid it was different. My old man owned six cabs. He had it nice. All the gas he could use." He stopped for a light and turned around and gave Dake a puzzled stare. "What happened to us? You ever try to figure that out? Where did it all go?"

"The war."

"That's what everybody says. I wonder. Seems like soon as we start to climb up there again, we get knocked down. Something always tripping us up. Somebody always tripping the world up."

"And then picking it up again?" Mary asked, smiling.

"Lady, in this world, you pick yourself up." He started up slowly, cursing the cars that passed him. "You know what I figure?"

"What?" Mary asked obediently.

"I figure we got to depend on those atom rocket boys. They're working day and night I understand. What we haven't got is resources. Now you take Mars, or Venus. I bet those places are loaded with coal and oil and iron and copper and every damn thing we need. We just got to get there first and stake a claim. Then we'll be okay."

"And if we never get off the earth?"

The driver's shoulders slumped. He said, in a dejected voice, "You know, mister, I just don't like to think about that. It means we're stuck here. And things aren't the way they used to be. My old man used to take me out to Ebbets Field. Yell his fool self hoarse over those bums. Can I do that? Who wants to yell at a bunch of silly dames playing softball, I ask you? Those good old days, mister, they're gone. Believe me. TV we had, and baseball, and all the gas you wanted. Every time I see those Indians around, I feel like maybe we're one of those kind of tribes, with bones sticking through our nose, and big spears. We're for kicks, mister."

They rode in silence for a time, nearing the apartment. The driver said, "When we used to have all them saucers around, my old man used to say it was time the Martians landed and took over. The old man had something, you know. Know what I think?"

"What?" said Dake.

"I figure those Martians took a good long look around and said to each other, boys, we better go away and come back in ten thousand years and see if these folk have grown up any. Man, it's dangerous down there. Is this place you want in the middle of the block?"

"Right over there on the right, driver," Mary said.

"Class, eh? Isn't that where the racketeer used to live? Larner? Mig Larner?"

"That's the place, driver."

They got out. The driver took the fare, grinned. "I didn't figure you to deadhead me. I can almost always tell. Be good now. Watch out for them Martians."

They walked into the coolness of the air-conditioned lobby. Johnny came around from behind the desk, hand outstretched. "Here for good this time, Dake?"

"I think so."

"Little stubborn, was he, Mary?"

"Did I take long?"

"Last ones in, dear. Martin Merman suddenly became interested in your space requirements the other day."

Mary smiled. "He's a hideous person. What he doesn't know, he can guess."

Johnny went back around to his side of the desk. "Both of you in suite 8 C then?"

Stop blushing furiously, darling.

"Yes, Johnny," she said.

"And so he'll twin you on assignments. You'll make an ominous pair, children. Shard will have a happy time assigning the equivalent. Now Martin is expecting you for a couple of brief impressive ceremonies."

They went down to the dioramic garden where Dake had first met Miguel Larner. Merman got up, his young-old face smiling, his hand-shake warm and firm.

He said, "It isn't something we can give you, Dake. It's something you have to find for yourself. You found it with Mary's help. Are you ready to accept?"

"Completely."

"THAT'S the only way we can . . . accept your acceptance. Without reservation. Raise your right hand, please. It isn't necessary to repeat the phrases after me. Just say 'I do' when I have finished. Do you, Dake Lorin, agree in heart, mind, and spirit with the eternal obligation of Earth, the planet of your origin, to provide leadership for Empire? Do you agree to accept dutifully all agent assignments given you with the full knowledge of the end purpose of those assignments, to provide leadership through keeping Earth, the planet of your origin, in a savage and backward state, where neither progress nor regression is possible? Do you promise to bring to this duty every resource of your mind and spirit, not only those resources recently acquired, but those developed in you by your environment prior to your association with us?"

Martin Merman's eyes were level, sober, serious.

"I do," Dake said.

"Now you are one of us, Dake. I'll break your heart a hundred times a year, from now on. At times you'll be sickened, angry, resentful. You will be called on to do things which, in your previous existence, you would have considered loathsome. But you'll do them. Because the purpose is clear. Cold. Inevitable." He grinned suddenly. It was an astonishingly boyish grin. "Anything else, Mary?" he asked.

"Another . . . little ceremony, Martin."

Now who looks like a beet?

"This is a tribal ceremony, Dake," Martin said. "A uniting. It has no legal status among us. Only a moral and emotional status. Either of you can dissolve it at any time by merely stating the desire that it be dissolved. However, in our history, no such a uniting has ever been dissolved. You will live and work together as the closest possible team. You will compliment each other's efficiencies, and heal each other's distress. Any children you may have will be taken from you and raised on one of the heart worlds, and you will renew your relationship with them once your duties here are over. They will still be children, still need you. And your eventual Empire assignment will be as close as your assignment here. Do you accept that?"

"If Mary does."

Mary nodded. Martin said, "Then we must have witnesses." He smiled.

There was the faintest shimmer and Karen suddenly appeared near them. And then Johnny. And Watkins. And one by one, others from his training class. And the persons he had seen in the lobby that night long ago. And strangers. Many of them. All appearing, grouping themselves in the bright garden.

Dake had always been a lonely man. He had never been a part of a group, and relished it, except during the months on Training T. There, for the first time, he had experienced the vague beginnings of group warmth and group unity.

And the warmth of all these people suddenly surrounded him, enfolded him. They had proud faces, and level eyes, and something unmistakably godlike about them. Super beings who walked among men with sadness, with pride, with humility.

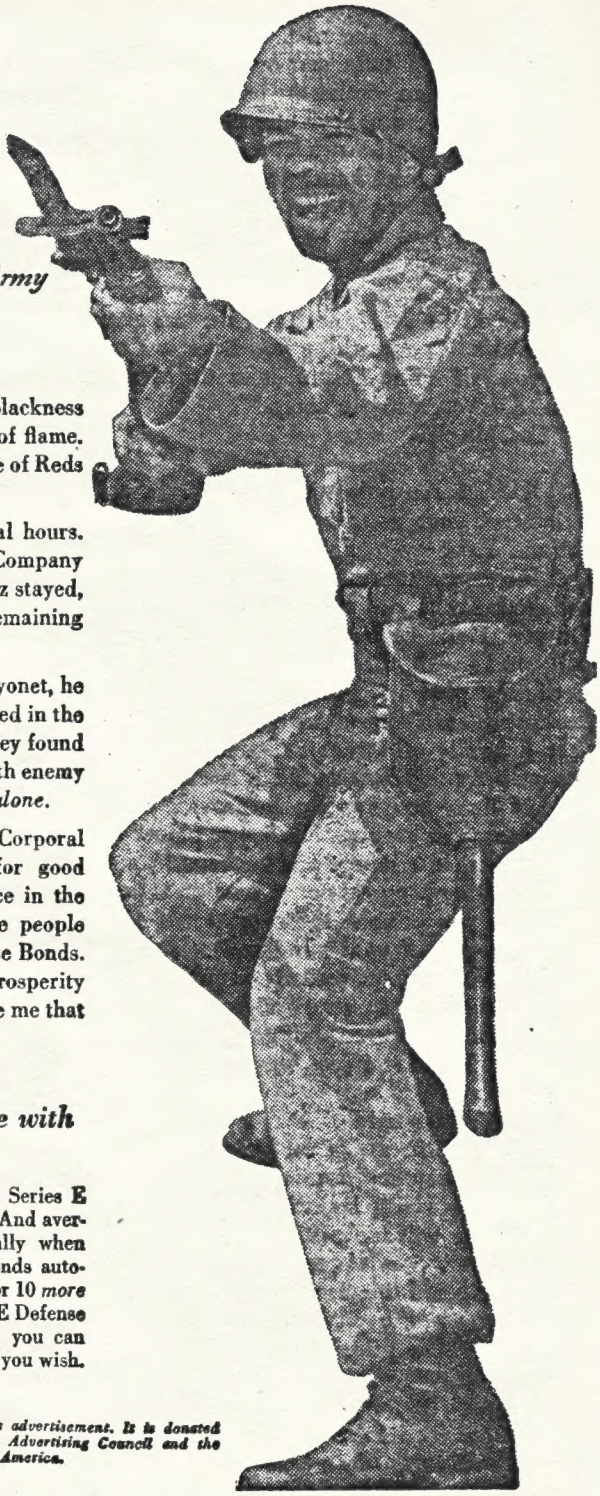
That group warmth caught him up. He was a part of it. He knew that never again would he have the feeling of walking alone.

He stood for long moments, tasting this final accceptance, sensing the hard challenge of the years ahead, knowing that now, at last, he began his apprenticeship.

And he reached and took Mary's firm brown hand, and turned enough so that the two of them stood, side by side, facing Martin Merman. Her fingers tightened on his.

Dake Lorin squared his shoulders and stood proudly, awaiting Martin Merman's words.

Corporal
Rodolfo P. Hernandez, U.S. Army
Medal of Honor



0200 HOURS! Suddenly the pre-dawn blackness on Hill 420 split into crashing geysers of flame. Yelling, firing, hurling grenades, a horde of Reds pushed up the hill toward G Company.

A hot fire fight began, lasting several hours. Finally, suffering heavy casualties, G Company began to withdraw. Corporal Hernandez stayed, throwing grenades and firing his remaining rounds.

Then his M-1 jammed. Fixing his bayonet, he leaped out of his foxhole and disappeared in the darkness toward the attacking Reds. They found him in the morning, wounded, ringed with enemy dead. But he had stopped the attack—*alone.*

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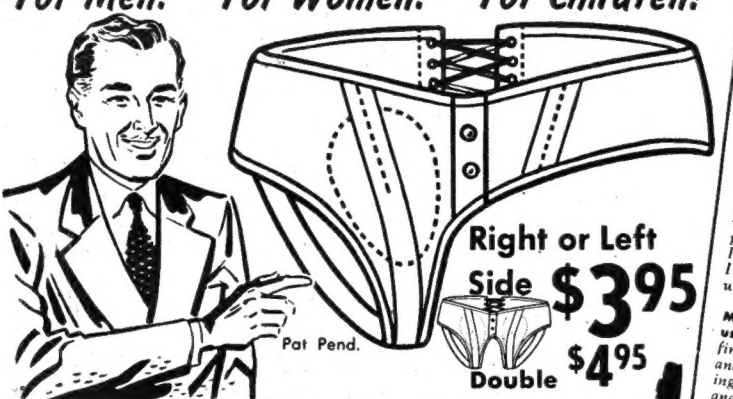

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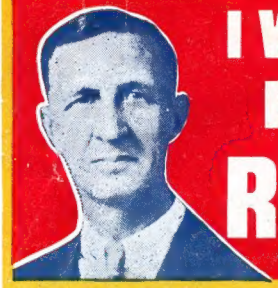

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